



PART 3:

THE ELI CHRONICLES

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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The Eli Chronicles**Chapter 1: Family Decision.**

Seven months had passed since their first contact with Archaeogenetics. Many simulations had been run after which, Jonathan having consulted with Dr. Dawson and Jack, the mutual decision had been made to delay the transplant until the few remaining risks were reduced even further. Jonathan had decided to continue Eli's estrogen treatments during that period, but with an exact copy of Hannah's own genetically-engineered estrogen, thus reducing to almost zero the odds of a rejection of any kind after the surgery. They were also still completing final testing on the new equipment that would be vital in ensuring a successful surgery; one which they all agreed would be extremely complex and delicate. In the meantime, three birthdays had been celebrated and the two households now contained a total of not one, but four teenagers at last; a milestone the four parents acknowledged with mild trepidation. Elaine and Rich, with Eli's approval, had finally decided to let Nils and Livia in on some of the Dawson family secrets.

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"You take my breath away," Livia said, when Dawson had finished. "It's absolutely amazing!"

"So not only are they identical, but Hannah's stem cells have been instrumental in this state-of-the-art research?"

Dawson nodded. "The techniques for growing human skin have made it all worthwhile, even if that were all they had accomplished; but the ability to grow human organs....just think about all the good they can accomplish."

"Hannah will be so pleased to hear this. But you didn't bring us here for this alone, did you?" Nils had sensed the tension as soon as he had entered the lab. Elaine seemed especially nervous to him.

"You're right, Nils. We do have something to tell you that is going to be a bit more difficult for you to absorb," Elaine said. "Dr. Törnkvist? Would you please explain Eli's origins to Hannah's parents?"

"Where to start? I suppose we should start with Eli's birth date." He turned to the blackboard, and quickly wrote: November 29, 1750.

"You mean 1983, don't you Doctor?" Livia asked.

"No, ma'am, I mean 1750. Eli was born in Sweden in 1750, but it's possible we're off by a year in either direction.

Nils and Livia looked at each other, incredulously. "That's impossible!" Nils exclaimed.

“Yes. Quite!” he smiled at them, “Nevertheless, that’s when she was born. We have incontrovertible proof of it, most of it historical, but more recently, direct proof that she was alive, exactly as you see her, over 14 years ago. But, even more important, you must accept the fact that Eli is only 13 years old mentally. She is still a child. This is an absolute fact. She began to age normally, only when the good Doctor here cured her of her...”sun allergy” 7 months ago.

“But ... how...” Livia stammered.

“Given that this is true, how could this have remained a secret all these years?” Nils asked. “It sounds like immortality to me. If true, why isn’t it generally known?”

“Because it comes with a price that no sane person would be willing to pay.”

Elaine looked at Rich, nervously. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head and put a finger to his lips.

“What price? I certainly can’t see a down-side.” Nils was genuinely puzzled now. *What on earth can that comment possibly mean?*

“All will be made clear soon. But first, we need to explain Oskar.” he said.

“Oskar? But...Oskar is Eli’s brother.” Livia’s eyes got big. “He’s not immortal too, is he?”

“No, No. At least, not any more. They’re both normal 13-year-olds now. But Oskar was immortal for a short 14 years. He was born in 1969, and stopped aging in 1982...it’s a bit complicated. So complicated that we’ll let Eli and Oskar explain it to you in a few minutes. We just wanted to give you a little background so you wouldn’t be overwhelmed.

“You mean to tell me that Hannah has befriended two ‘children,’ one who is simply ancient and the other twice her age? I don’t like this at all! Why didn’t you tell us, Elaine?”

Elaine didn’t like the way this was going. She could feel the tension building. “We’re telling you now, Livia. I’m sorry we couldn’t tell you sooner. Too much was at stake and we had no idea how fast and how strongly the two of them would bond with Hannah; and she with them. Please, forgive us.” Elaine took her hand in hers. “And, I suspect that, without the good Doctor here, backed by his well-funded organization, you wouldn’t have believed us.”

“And remember; both Eli and Oskar are only 13. They have NOT aged mentally. You must certainly have seen that for yourselves,” Törnkvist knew he had to make this point clear to them.

“Of course, you’re right.” Livia looked at Nils, who nodded in agreement. “And I don’t think either of them could have fooled Hannah. But still...all those life experiences must count for something...” Her voice trailed off. She couldn’t wrap her mind around the ramifications of it all.

She felt a cold chill as she remembered the darker part of the Doctor's statement. "Now, what price did she have to pay? And I don't believe you're talking only about her sun allergy."

"She was infected by a parasite; a quite complicated one, it turns out -- one that has existed as near as we can tell, for millions of years in one form or another. We think it began using humans as a host sometime after Homo Sapiens became the sole living species of its genus."

"Why haven't we heard of it then?" Nils asked.

"You have," Jonathan said. "You've heard of Vampires, I presume?"

Nils' face turned red. "Are you trying to make fools of us? This is ridiculous! Are you saying that Eli is a vampire?"

"WAS a vampire. She is no longer one, thanks to Dr. Dawson."

"Enough! I'm not really sure what's going on here, but this is really too much! How can we possibly believe you? And even if we did, that means our daughter's life has been in danger, at least up until recently, and no one saw fit to tell us about it!" Livia was outraged. She jerked open the door to the waiting room, "Hannah! Come in here please!"

Oskar and Eli looked at each other, then hurried in behind Hannah.

"Hannah, have they told you these things? That Eli is a vampire, and Oskar is twenty-something years old?"

"Yes Mom. And it's the truth! I've seen it with my own eyes!"

"What have you seen?" Livia was frightened now. She couldn't even begin to absorb what they were telling her. And their own daughter had bought into this nonsense. *Who are these people anyway? What do they want from us?*

"I've seen Eli's wings. She can fly! And she's really strong! She saved my life when I fell out of my tree. She caught me and saved my life! And Eli's mom was a vampire too."

Elaine gasped and gripped Rich's hand tightly.

"What?!!" Nils stood up and put his hands firmly on Hannah's shoulders. His head was buzzing. "I think we've had quite enough of this. Hannah, we're leaving now. And I think it would be best under the circumstances if you...not see any of these people again. I'm sorry."

Dad, you can't do this! Eli is my best friend in the world! And Oskar too! You simply can't do this! They're telling you the truth! And I was never in danger! Eli would never, never have hurt me! We're sisters! We're the same!"

Livia turned to Richard and Elaine, red faced, “We trusted you! We trusted you with Hannah, and now you spring this nonsense on us? And you’ve somehow convinced her that your own children are...freaks of some kind? How could you? And to what purpose?” Livia was almost incoherent.

“Please,” Richard pleaded, “Just let Oskar and Eli talk to you for a few minutes. Everything will make sense then.”

But it was too late. Nils and Livia were already halfway out the door, dragging a protesting Hannah after them. The door slammed behind them with a definite feeling of finality.

The silence in the room was deafening, broken only by the sound of Eli sobbing.

“I told you this wouldn’t work! Why on Earth did you think they’d believe such an outrageous story without a shred of evidence?” Elaine said angrily, “We should have done it my way...and Rich’s.”

“But my father told me that Hannah’s parents would accept Eli.” Jonathan said, defensively. “That’s why I thought that a straight-up direct approach would be best.”

“That’s the sole reason you took this approach? Sounds to me like you trapped yourself in one of your own father’s ‘time loops;’ only you didn’t have the ability to compensate for it, because you couldn’t see how your ridiculous approach would change the future. Everything’s changed now. I should have been more insistent.” She turned to Eli, “Don’t worry, Butterfly, we’ll fix this. I promise.”

“But how?! They hate me now! They hate Oskar! and I like them so much! They’re so nice.” she sobbed. Now I’ll never see her again! I just know it!”

“Eli, that’s not true! Mom and Dad will fix this. I know they will.” Oskar put his arm around her, and they sat down on the couch together.

“I’m so sorry! How can I help undo this?” Jonathan was mortified. Elaine was right; he knew as soon as she said it. He had been overconfident and ruined everything.

“You might start by having their family doctor talk to them. How much does he know?” Dawson tried to stay calm, but he was losing the battle.

“Enough. I’ll talk to him as soon as we’re done here. Perhaps he CAN help. Eli, I’m really sorry!”

“Papa, what can we do? I can’t bear that I might never see her again!” she put her arms around him. “I can’t even imagine how Hannah must feel right now!”

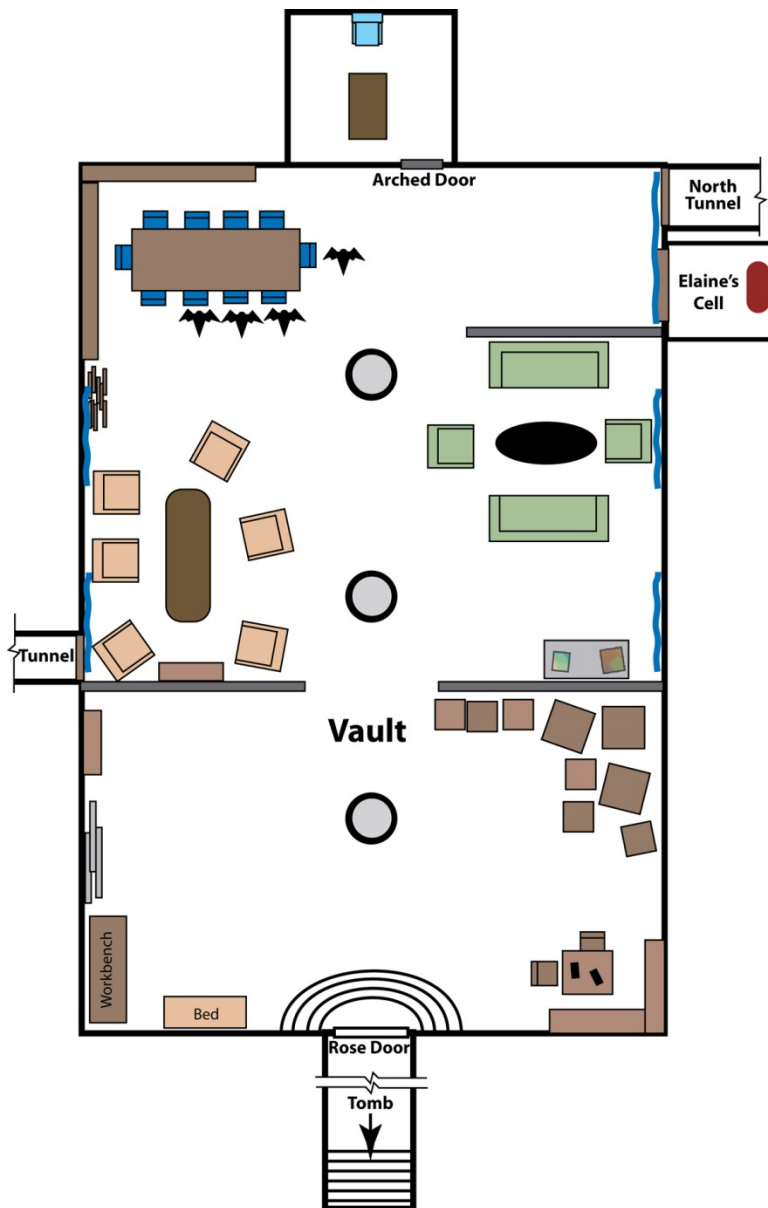
“Don’t worry, Eli. Gudmund’s future may still be salvageable. Remember, if he saw them accepting you, then they must have it in their hearts to do so. And that’s what’s important. Have

faith in your mother and me. And don't worry; I'm sure they don't hate you and Oskar. I suspect all their anger is directed at us, for our perceived betrayal of their trust."

The ride home was quiet. Absolutely everything was on hold now. Eli refused to allow Jonathan to do any further tests on her until Hannah was back. Nothing they said could change her mind. Richard knew from his personal experiences with her these last 15 years that two centuries had taught her some things too well. Her surgery would simply not happen without Hannah by her side.

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He quietly drew back the velvet curtain, stepped forward, and took in the vast darkened chamber laid out before him. He breathed in deeply, but could smell nothing new, nothing recently dead; only death that was many, many years old. He heard nothing but the subtle creaking of the huge timber beams in the ceiling as they moved imperceptibly with the increasing weight of the saturated soil above them due to the recent heavy rains. He motioned to several dark forms behind him, who quickly emerged from the black tunnel and joined him. Their golden eyes scanned the vault as they fanned out looking for clues, any sign of what may have happened to their long overdue host. Overdue for the meeting of The Five.



He found the wall switch and flipped it on. The overhead lights came on suddenly, temporarily blinding them with their brilliance. “Damn him! I could never get used to all this light!” He especially hated it because he knew *Den Andra* only had it installed to accommodate his strange partner; his unwilling accomplice; the artist, whom he had kept alive for reasons well understood, but distasteful to him. He had always found his fascinations with all things sexual to be a bit...disgusting and distracting. It was *Den Andra's* only weakness. But he was gone. Apparently he had come up against something ... unexpected. And lost. That was what they were finally here to determine. No loose ends. They couldn't afford it. Their numbers had shrunk over the ages from seven to four. They could afford no more losses because their perceived high status allowed for no recruiting. *Another topic of conversation*, he thought to himself, always the pragmatist. And one of the loose ends was, of course, the artist. Where was she? Did He finally tire of her and dispose of her? Or...

They slowly gathered at the large conference table at the end of the vault, spoke their ancient vows to each other and began their twelfth meeting of the Twentieth Year. The first, second, and seventh chairs stood empty. *Den Tredje* stood up, bowed to the others and in a low voice, almost a whisper, began.

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Rich hung up the phone, stepped into the kitchen and sat down at the table, discouraged.

Elaine poured him a cup of tea. “What’s the verdict, Rich? Did they agree to meet again?” she was afraid she already knew the answer.

He shook his head slowly, “I’m afraid not. The doctor’s attempts fell on deaf ears. It’s not his fault; he was kind of caught between a rock and a hard place. Under the circumstances, he feared revealing how much he really knew, and how involved Archaeogenetics had actually been in Hannah’s in vitro procedure, for fear they might actually become frightened enough to involve the police. That had to be avoided at all costs. Consequently, he could only offer strong character recommendations, background on the size and prestige of the company, and assurances that everything was on the up and up. He couldn’t convince them. And it’s been three weeks now. The longer this goes on the harder it’s going to be to change their minds.”

Elaine thought hard for a moment. She understood their position all too well, “What proof do we have? Neither Eli nor myself have any abilities left. Oskar is the only one, and if we had done things our way he would have been enough. Frankly, our only chance to convince them was Oskar’s ESP and Eli’s own life experiences. There IS no other way. Even you needed that and you had already seen her wings, and found her food.”

“Elaine, the fact that I did both of those things before I read her is a testament to her character. It helped, of course, but somehow I was already convinced that I had to help her. I’m just hoping that Nils and Livia will have the same...insight if we can present Eli to them properly. We just have to figure out how.” He glanced up at the cupboard and saw Hannah’s fairy cup on the shelf, next to Eli’s and Oskar’s ordinary ones. *How long has it been now since she came bounding down the stairs, full of excitement, and told us how she was going to have Eli’s baby for her?* He smiled to himself. *We are absolutely going to fix this. There has to be a way!*

Elaine followed his gaze to the shelf, then took his hand. “Hannah is ... an amazing child isn’t she? It’s no wonder we all miss her so much. In certain ways, she’s stronger even than Eli.” Her voice got hard. “If you and I can’t figure out how to do this, no one can!” She squeezed his hand reassuringly.

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Hannah paced back and forth rapidly; then angrily kicked Einstein’s favorite ball across the room and banged her head again and again against the bay window in frustration. She sat down on the window seat and stared across the street. From the second floor, she could look directly into her tree, to the very branch where Eli and she had talked that first night and Eli had revealed so many

wonderful secrets to her. And saved her life for the first time. “Mom and Dad have got to understand! Everything they said was true.”

Jason looked up from the table. “You’ve got to admit though; it all seems so...far-fetched. And if they lied to you, Mom and Dad certainly did the right thing.”

“They didn’t lie to me! I saw things with my own eyes!”

“Okay, okay. I didn’t mean to get you upset. It’s just that it all sounds like something from a cheap horror movie.”

“But it’s not! It’s the truth, and I’ve got to prove it to them! There’s got to be a way.” She thought about all the times she had touch-talked with them; all the stories she had heard. There had to be something ...something she could actually hold in her hands that might make her parents believe her. And she had to convince Jason. For some reason that was really important to her right now. “Jason, could you come into my room for a second? I have... something I need to show you.”

“Sure! Anything to get out of this math homework.” He followed her into her room and sat down in her desk chair as she fumbled around under her bed for a moment. Finally, she pulled out an old shoebox and placed it carefully on the bed. *She’s really serious about this! What could she possibly have to show me that could change my mind?* Jason got up and sat down beside her as she took off the lid. He gently put his arm around her as she carefully lifted out a cardboard tube, pulled out the rolled-up paper and spread it out in her lap. He was determined he was going to really hear her out this time.

She smiled at him, then pointed to the top of the page, “This is our family tree. Eli gave it to me the night we first met. You’ll recognize the names at the top here...”

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Eli tossed and turned, trying to get to sleep. She was irritated at Oskar because he had drifted off as though he hadn’t a care in the world. *How could he just...sleep like that? Doesn’t he care that we may never see her again?* Eli raised herself up on her elbow and poked Oskar. “Oskar, they can’t do this! I won’t let them! We need to just go over there and tell them that we won’t put up with this any longer. Mama and I will...”

He rubbed his eyes, and turned around to face her. “You’ll what, Eli? Scare them into letting you see Hannah? You can’t do that anymore, remember? They’d just get a restraining order or something and things would be even worse than before.”

“I wish I’d never had the shot!! Then I could just fly over there and ... show them!”

“Yeah. Like that would work. They would just be even more afraid of you, Eli.” He put his arms around her. “We have to let Mom and Dad handle this. Like it or not, we’re BOTH just ordinary kids now.”

She pushed him away roughly. “Speak for yourself, Oskar!” She threw herself out of bed, stormed out the door, ran across the hall and slammed her door behind her.

Oskar waited patiently a few minutes, then quietly got up, walked across the hall and tried her door. It was unlocked. He breathed a sigh of relief, slipped in quietly and sat down on the edge of her bed. “Eli, do you remember when we saw the house for the first time? How excited we were when Papa opened the front door and you rushed in because you wanted to see your room?” He rubbed her back gently.

She turned around and looked up at him, smiling, “Yeah, and Papa was so afraid that I would bleed because he hadn’t invited me in...”

“And then he realized that he didn’t need to invite you into your own home.” Oskar leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “I always wondered how that worked...” He scratched his head.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Oskar. I didn’t mean it.”

“...I know.”

“You always know. But I’m sorry anyway.”

“Why don’t we sleep in here tonight. Okay?” he pulled the blanket up around her shoulders.

She nodded, smiling. He slipped in next to her and kissed her softly. She put her arms around him.

Sleep came much easier to her this time.

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It had been a week now since Hannah had first talked to Jason. Her frustration at her parents had reached a critical level. *Why are they so angry? Jason believes me! Why won’t they?* They had both finally agreed that showing their parents the family tree would probably just get them angrier. They were convinced that their parents would consider it just another lie, another manipulation. It didn’t seem to matter to Mom and Dad that, try as they might, they couldn’t begin to understand what the Dawsons had to gain from this deception. So Hannah had finally decided to take matters into her own hands. *If you want something done right, do it yourself. Dad taught me that!.* She slipped on her heavy khaki shorts, her long-sleeved black shirt, and her high-top hiking boots. *No telling what I’m going to run into. With all that rain last week...*

Hannah adjusted the straps on her backpack and checked her watch; 11:15. *Mom and Dad should be asleep by now.* She sat down on her bed and scratched Einstein behind the ears. “Shh! Don’t worry,” she whispered. “I’ll be back before you get hungry in the morning. In the meantime, you can sleep right here on my pillow.” She plumped it up for him, pulled her blanket up over him, and slipped quietly out her door. She bumped into Jason in the hall, almost losing her balance as

her backpack slipped off her shoulder. “Where do you think you’re going? Mom and Dad are going to kill you,” he hissed.

“Jason, please. Don’t tell them I’m gone. I’ll be back before morning, and it’ll be Saturday. They’ll never know.” She hastily readjusted the straps.

“That all depends on where you’re going.” He folded his hands across his chest and glared at her.

“I’m... just going over to see Eli,” she lied. “Please Jason, let me...”

“Okay, Hannah. I understand. I’ll keep my mouth shut. But please, wake me as soon as you get home. Promise?”

“I promise!”

“Be sure to say ‘hi’ to Hannah Junior for me.” He winked at her.

Oh Jason, I love you so much!” she hugged him, then turned and vanished down the stairs. He watched her walk down the sidewalk toward Tillingham, and waited at the window until he saw her board the bus. *Why on earth did she wear her hiking boots? What is she planning on doing over there anyway?* He checked in on Einstein, then lay back on Hannah’s bed with his hands behind his head. Since the big blowup, he and Hannah had become close again, like they had been before. Before he had gotten so involved with his school friends and activities, he remembered with regret. He had forgotten how much he had always enjoyed her sweetness and her light -- and the way she always trusted him and looked up to him. He had always been so proud of her, his sweet little sister. But he had forgotten for a while how close they had always been. He was determined he’d never forget again.

And he believed her. After listening to her tell him the same stories over and over again, unflinching, looking him straight in the eye, he found himself believing every unbelievable tale she had told him. He didn’t know why, but he did. And he felt so certain of it that he was becoming more and more angry at his parents’ intractability.

Hannah slumped down in the seat, as the bus lumbered along the dimly-lit streets. She felt awful about having lied to Jason, but he would never have let her go if he knew where she was going. She studied the bus schedule carefully, making notes of the transfers and connections she would have to make to get to Mile End and Burdett. She went over it again and again in her mind. She had seen it so clearly when Oskar and Eli had touch-talked with her, that she was sure she could find it with ease. And once there, she would take photos. Photos of everything! Of the tomb, of the vault, of the royal blue velvet drapes, the bookcases, the portraits, the banquet table, and the beautiful Rose Door. Then Mom and Dad would have to believe. How else would she know of such a place? The place where Eli’s mama had been held captive for 40 years. How could they not believe her then?

Finally, after what had seemed like hours, she stepped off the bus and stood in the darkness for a moment, watching as the bus moved rapidly away, continuing on down Mile End Road. She

tightened the straps on her backpack and headed down Burdett, towards the cemetery. She turned left down Hamlets Way, then followed the sidewalk around the cemetery until she reached the main entrance. She recognized it immediately. She looked around, carefully avoiding the streetlight, then turned in, stepped through the open gate, and slowly walked past the outbuilding; the outbuilding where Eli was almost killed by the Other One. She visualized the white gravel roof and the broken, twisted, blood-covered steel manacles as clearly as if she were standing there. Just for an instant, she imagined she had turned around on the roof and was looking down at herself as she started off along the dark path. She glanced behind the building and saw the fire escape spiraling upwards into the darkness. She walked along the path, reluctant to use her flashlight until she was out of view of the street, but it was slow-going without it. Finally, at a familiar turn, she pulled it out of her backpack and turned it on.

The beam struck the entrance to Eli's tomb. She recognized it by the one-winged Eagle at the peak of the roof, exactly as she had seen it in Eli's mind. She shuddered as she realized she was standing on the very spot where the Other One had been spiked to the ground and died in agony when the sun had come up in the morning. She stepped away quickly, feeling the hair rise up on the back of her neck. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.* She shook it off, largely because she knew this could be her last chance to convince her parents. Pictures of these things provided by the Dawsons was one thing; photos from her own camera were quite another, and would be indisputable proof. They would have to believe her then.

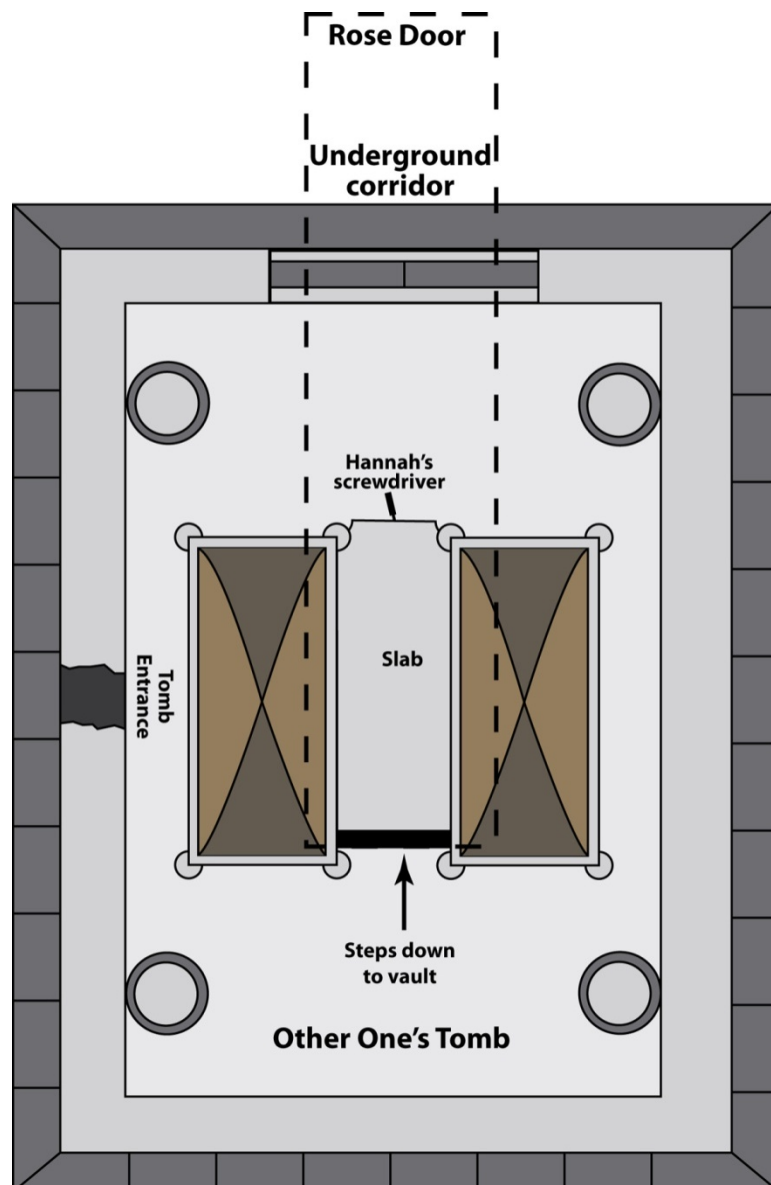
She turned around once to get her bearings, then, following Oskar's memories of the pursuit, headed up the hill towards the barely visible white tomb at the top. Her mind was suddenly filled with the image of the Other One running down the hill after Eli, intent on revenge for her having made a fool of Him. She shuddered at the thought of what He would have done to her if He had managed to catch her. *How brave they all were!* Standing here alone in the darkness made her really understand that for the first time.

She put her backpack down next to the white tomb and pulled out her camera. She carefully attached her flash and took a couple of test pictures of the white tomb, then picked up her pack and carefully felt her way down the other side of the hill to His tomb, dark and foreboding, in the moon-shadow of the hill. She was beginning to feel confident again; everything was as she had envisioned it. She grabbed the entrance stone and jerked hard, but it wouldn't budge. She braced her legs against the adjacent stones and pulled even harder. She thought she felt it move a little, but additional effort produced no further movement at all. She sat back on the damp grass, disgusted with herself. *How could I have been so stupid?! I don't have Eli's strength! I forgot that it was Eli who moved the stone so easily.*

She sighed, then pulled a crowbar out of her backpack, wedged it between the tomb wall and the stone, and pulled with all her might. Little by little she worked it out until, by bracing her feet against the wall and holding the end of the crowbar against her chest, she finally dislodged it completely. She fell back on the grass as it turned over on its side, revealing a dark hole in the ground and a small metal plate, still covering the entrance. *I never imagined I'd need this for the stone. I just hope I'm strong enough to move the marble slab, or this will have all been for nothing!* Fortunately, she was able to remove the plate with little difficulty. She put her flashlight away and backed into the hole, dragging the backpack in front of her.

She stood up in the chamber, put her small lantern on a sarcophagus, and looked at her watch: 3 o'clock. It had taken her almost 4 hours to get this far. She'd have to hurry or she'd never get home in time. She examined the floor between the two sarcophagi carefully, and right away spotted the two quarter-circle gaps between the slab and the ball-and-claw feet beneath them. She reached in, placed her fingers in the grooves, and pulled hard, but of course, nothing moved, just as she had expected.

She slid the flat end of the crowbar into the groove on the left side of the slab, and pushed down as hard as she could on the other end. The slab lifted up smoothly and silently. She breathed a sigh of relief and slipped a long, heavy screwdriver into the now-visible gap between the slab and the floor, then gently released the crowbar. The slab settled just a bit, resting on the screwdriver, but still remained high enough to clear the floor if she could just muster up the strength and get the proper leverage to push it from the other end; the final obstacle. She was breathing heavily now. It had been much more difficult than she had imagined. *I wish I had brought Jason with me*, she thought to herself, but she knew he would never have come, even though he was on her side. He would have known it was too dangerous, and might even have been able to convince her not to come – which is why she hadn't confided in him.



She rested a few minutes, then moved around the right sarcophagus to the other end of the slab, being careful not to disturb it. The gap between the slab and the floor was small, but she was just able to get the tip of the crowbar into it. She pulled on the other end and the slab moved forward about an inch. She carefully relaxed her hold on the crowbar, but the slab remained where it was. *Good! It didn't slide back.* She slipped the crowbar into the gap, felt it grab against the first stair riser, and pushed with all her strength. The slab slid another three inches, then stopped hard, as though it was binding up against something. She saw immediately what had happened. The other end of the slab had slid along her screwdriver and was up against the butt of the handle. The screwdriver, instead of lying flat on the floor as she had expected, was tilted up at an odd angle. There was no way the slab was going to move any further.

Frustrated, she removed the crowbar and went back to the elevated end of the slab, but she couldn't budge the screwdriver without pushing the slab back into place. She sighed, put down

the crowbar, and put her head in her hands. This was taking way too long. She had to think of something fast.

It was then that she heard the sound. It reminded her of the sound the wind made during fierce storms as it blew past her bedroom window; a kind of low moaning sound, rising and-falling like the voices of tortured souls. She shuddered, remembering how much it had scared her when she was younger. And even now, on those nights, Einstein almost always shared her bed with her. She glanced over at the tomb entrance and saw bits of dust and leaves scurrying across the marble floor, drawn in from outside. She quickly picked up the flashlight and went back around to the now four-inch opening at the other end of the slab, crouched down on her hands and knees, and peered into the darkness. She could feel the strong air current moving rapidly past her into the slit and disappearing down the stairs into the darkness; so strong that her hair was flying past her face and streaming down the crack as though being drawn into a vacuum cleaner hose. She directed the beam of the flashlight as far as she could down the wood-paneled corridor, until she could just make out the door at the end. She gasped as she immediately recognized it; Elaine's Rose Door, beautiful and ghostly white, shimmering in the unsteady beam of light. *So near, and yet so far*, she thought to herself. The crack beneath the door was obviously the source of the sound; a crack, she suddenly realized, she could see clearly because light was streaming through it from the other side!

She leaned forward to get a better look, inadvertently pressing her hand down hard on the slab. Suddenly, with a loud rumble, it slid off the screwdriver and slammed back into place. The deafening sound reverberated in the confined tomb, making her ears ring. She reflexively jumped away, but her head snapped back and hit the marble floor with a loud smack. Her hair was caught firmly in the now tightly-closed crack. Though in a daze, she realized immediately that her backpack was well out of her reach and her flashlight, though still lit, was rolling slowly away from her in a graceful arc along the slab.

She was trapped.

§

Four heads turned simultaneously toward the sound echoing through the vault. Without a word, The Four moved swiftly and silently across the black-and-white-checkered floor and up the steps at the far end of the vault. *Den Tredje* slowly opened the Rose Door and moved stealthily down the wood-paneled corridor, sniffing the air as he went. His baleful shadow moved slowly before him and crept up the marble steps beneath the tomb.

Chapter 2: Family Values.

“Rich! Would you get the phone?” Elaine poked him again. Dawson rolled over, grumbling, and grabbed the phone off the nightstand.

“Hello?”

“Richard? This is Nils. Is Hannah there?” Dawson sat up quickly on the edge of the bed.

“No, she’s not! What’s happened?”

“Einstein started barking about 1:30, and when he didn’t stop, Livia went up to check on Hannah. She was gone. Jason finally admitted to us that she had left at about 11:30 or so for your house. Oddly though, she took all her camera equipment with her. Are you sure you haven’t seen her? Would you please ask Eli if she’s seen her?”

“Of course! Hang on. Elaine? Go get Eli and Oskar! Hannah’s missing.” She put on her robe and headed for the door. “Make sure Hannah isn’t in either of their rooms!” he called after her. “I’m so sorry Nils. Is there anything we can do? Be assured that if she turns up here, we’ll bring her straight home.”

“I...Thank you, Richard. I appreciate it.” Dawson pressed the speaker phone button as soon as he heard them running down the stairs.

Eli and Oskar rushed into the room, with Elaine right behind them. “Papa, what’s happened to her? Where would she have gone if she didn’t come here? Why didn’t she come here? Has something terrible happened to her?”

Nils’ heart sank. Hannah clearly hadn’t been there. “Richard, do any of you have any idea where she might have gone? Especially in the middle of the night? We’re out of ideas here.”

Oskar and Eli looked at each other. Nothing. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sandstrøm. Maybe Old Finchleians?”

“No, Eli. Jason said she got on the bus.”

“The Bus? But...here is the only place she would come! Something must have happened to her! Papa, we have to go look for her!”

“Livia and I are going to drive to the end of the bus route and backtrack through the neighborhood. Perhaps the driver will remember her. There can’t be too many children on the Bus alone at 11:30. We’ll take our mobile phone with us. Please call if you hear anything.”

“You too, Nils. Good luck!” Dawson hung up the phone. “Think, you two. Where would she have gone? It’s got to have something to do with you, Eli. What would make her go out in the middle of the night by herself that could help her fix this with her parents?”

“There’s nothing! If there were, I would have thought of it myself!” she said, frustrated. She smiled sheepishly. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“I know what you meant, Eli.” Papa put his arm around her. “Let’s just calm down and think.”

The phone rang again. Eli snatched it up, “Hello? Hannah?”

“Eli? This is Jason. Mom and Dad have gone looking for Hannah, and I had to call.”

“Jason? Do you know where she is?”

“No, but I found Dad’s toolbox in her closet. She took his crowbar and several big screwdrivers with her, as near as I can tell. And Dad’s electric lantern, and her own flashlight. What would she need all that for?” He paused, “And she was wearing her hiking boots.”

Eli knew. She was certain. “I think I know, Jason. Stay by the phone. But please, please don’t tell your parents. They’ll hate us even more if they find out. If I’m right, we’ll find her and bring her home, okay? I promise!”

“Okay Eli.” He paused, “And for what it’s worth, I believe you. I believe everything. Please call as soon as you find my little sister. Please?”

“We will, I promise.” *Dear Jason! Hannah was right about him.*

“Where, Eli? Where is she?” Papa was already dressed and was putting on his jacket.

“The vault, Papa. I think she went to the vault to take pictures of everything. To prove to her parents that we were telling the truth.” She remembered that when Hannah had called her right after the blowup, she had asked Eli about the photos; that maybe they would convince them. They had both decided that her parents would just think they were faked. Only if they saw it for themselves would it convince them. *She probably thought that pictures she took herself might do the trick.*

“Eli, we haven’t been there for at least 10 years. The place could be falling down by now without regular maintenance. It’s probably quite dangerous, and she’s just a child. She can’t possibly get into the tomb by herself, let alone the vault.” He grabbed the car keys. “Let’s go!” He hurried down the stairs with Oskar.

“Eli, I’ve written a note to Hannah in case she turns up here. I’ll leave it on the kitchen table. We’ll leave the lights on and the front door unlocked. I told her to call us on the mobile phone.” Elaine put her arm around her and hurried her down the stairs after Papa.

“I’ll drive, Rich” she pushed past him and reached for the keys. He handed them to her without protest and threw his own toolbox and flashlights into the trunk.

§

It was 3:30 when they finally turned off their lights and drove slowly along the service road into the cemetery. Finally they pulled to a stop at the bottom of the hill next to Dr. Llewellyn's headstone. Eli and Oskar grabbed a flashlight and started up the hill. Richard grabbed the tool box, Elaine the first-aid kit, and they followed quickly behind.

“

Oskar stopped suddenly. “Eli!” he hissed. There’s ... someone there! There’s three...no, four of them! I can hear them! I can see them!”

“What do you mean, Oskar? I can’t hear anything.” Eli suddenly realized he could still sense vampires. They hadn’t been sure after his ‘cure’ what his limitations would be, and since neither Eli nor Elaine were vampires any longer, they had no way to determine them. Now they knew for sure.

“They’re in the vault! Four of them. And they’re ... not nice. They’re like the Other One. And they’re in the corridor by the Rose Door, listening. Listening for a sound; any sound.”

Oskar could suddenly see clearly the hand of the one who called himself *Den Tredje*, reaching up, delicately touching something protruding from the underside of the slab at the top of the stairs. Hair! It looks like human hair. He felt him move forward slightly and sniff the air near the tightly closed crack. *Human. The smell of a human...* His long tongue snaked out and licked the strand of hair. *Young. Female. Alive, at least recently.* He turned, and put his finger to his lips. The others crouched silently at the foot of the steps. He turned back and put the palm of his hand gently against the marble slab and waited. Waited for any small vibration, any sound that would give away who and how many there were.

“Dad, they’ve heard a loud noise in the tomb, and have come down the corridor to investigate. He’s licked her hair!” The smell of Lavender Shampoo suddenly flooded his senses; his own translation of the smell *Den Tredje* was mulling over. “It’s Hannah! I know it!” His shrill voice broke the silence. Elaine quickly put her hand over his mouth.

“Shhh! They can’t know we’re here, or all is lost. Once they determine that there’s only a small child above them, they won’t hesitate. We’d never make it in time.” *Thank God for their predatory caution. Let’s hope we can take advantage of it.* “And Hannah can’t know either. If she talks, they’ll hear.” They moved up the hill cautiously and gathered around the dislodged stone.

“Maybe she’ll come out,” she whispered. “The slab is still in place. If she comes out, we can leave quickly.” Elaine leaned into the hole and listened.

Hannah lay there for a few minutes, collecting her thoughts. *There was a light! If someone was there, they certainly heard all the racket.* She put her ear to the floor and listened. *Who could it possibly be? Maybe some kids discovered it and use it for a hangout. But I’d be able to hear them talking,* she reasoned. No, it was surely something more sinister. Or was her imagination running away with her, as was so often the case?

She raised her head as far as she could, and reached for the flashlight. It was no use. Perhaps if she turned around and slid back across the slab, she could reach it ...

“She’s moving,” Oskar hissed. “I...He can feel her moving.”

Den Tredje motioned to the nearest. “Take *Den Femte* with you and leave by the other entrance. Send him back as soon as you see who and how many.” he whispered. “Handle it yourselves if you can do so without attracting undue attention.”

What was that!? I heard something! Hannah suddenly got a knot in her stomach. This was real. Someone...or something was there. And she was trapped. The potential seriousness of her situation hit her hard. All her childhood nightmares surged to the forefront and she was suddenly paralyzed with fear --- because, thanks to Eli, she knew now that some of the monsters in her nightmares really did exist. She began trembling. *Get a grip!!* She willed herself to be still, then pressed her ear to the floor. She ever so carefully groped behind her with her foot, dragged the flashlight closer, and picked it up. The lantern still provided ample light, but the flashlight was heavy. If someone came out, perhaps she could defend herself with it.

Fear! I smell fear. He held his nose to the crack. His hand moved slowly over the underside of the slab, sensing...a rapid heartbeat against the stone. *One, so far. If there’s only one...* He reached over with his other hand and rubbed the protruding hair between his fingers. *So much hair, and evenly distributed, as if...*

“Dad! He’s sending two of them out through the other entrance...”

“The other entrance is beside the small North Gate.” Elaine whispered. “If they move cautiously, as they most likely will, it should take them less than 10 minutes to reach it. Then, once they’re outside in their element, only a matter of a minute or so to get back here. We have to be gone by then.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Dawson whispered as he rummaged through his toolbox.

Eli suddenly brushed past Elaine and disappeared down the hole.

“Eli!” Elaine grabbed for her, but missed.

Hannah’s head jerked up at the sound. “Eli? Is that you?” Her heart leaped for joy as she saw Eli’s face suddenly appear over the top of the sarcophagus. “I’m trapped! My hair is caught in the crack.”

“Be quiet!” Eli put her finger to her lips and pointed at the floor.

“Two children!” *Den Tredje* hissed with anticipation. He planted his right foot firmly on the fourth step, reached back and slowly lifted the slab, simultaneously gathering as much of the hair as possible in his left hand.

Eli gasped as she saw the far end of the slab rise up.

“Eli, He’s coming!” Oskar yelled.

Dawson plunged head-first into the opening, brushed past Eli, and scrambled around the sarcophagus. As the crack widened, he poured his entire can of lantern fuel into the darkness.

Hannah’s head suddenly jerked back against the slab. A clawed hand snaked up out of the darkness and grabbed an even larger handful of her hair. Dawson could see golden eyes blazing as he pulled out his lighter.

The slab began to move rapidly away from the stairs. Hannah was face up now, back arched, her head dangling over the edge of the slab, hair firmly in *Den Tredje*’s grasp. His golden eyes bore directly into Dawson’s for a moment, then his mouth opened into an evil grin. “It’s your move,” he hissed. He tilted her head back exposing her neck, opened his fang-filled mouth, and leered at Dawson. Hannah’s legs flailed about as she tried desperately to keep herself from slipping further into the darkness.

“Let her go!” Eli screamed. Dawson barely caught a glimpse of the crowbar as it blew by his head in a tight arc, missed Hannah’s head by inches, and with a muffled thud, struck *Den Tredje*’s clawed hand dead center. Eli could feel the bones shattering. She threw the crowbar in his snarling face, grabbed Hannah’s hand and jerked her to her feet. They scrambled around the back end of the sarcophagus, snatched up Hannah’s backpack and lunged for the opening. Just as her head cleared the entrance and she felt herself being lifted up by Elaine and Oskar, Hannah felt the whoosh and blast of heat as the lantern fuel ignited behind her.

“Rich!” Elaine just barely had time to turn back, when Dawson, hair singed, scrambled quickly out, and rolled the stone back over the entrance.

Without a word, they ran as fast as they could down the hill and scrambled into the car, throwing their gear in before them. Eli, Hannah, and Oskar piled into the back seat on top of one another. Elaine started the car and squealed down the service road, the back end of the car sliding sideways as she rounded the corner. They heard a dull thump and turned in time to see a cloud of smoke rise into the air from the side of the tomb, just as it vanished from sight around the crest of the hill.

As soon as Elaine cleared the gate, she turned down a dark side street, drove slowly and deliberately through the maze of alleys and finally pulled into the light traffic on Burdett Road. She looked at her watch. It had been just eight minutes since Oskar had warned them. “It’s up to you now, Oskar. Keep us informed. Let us know if they head this direction.”

The children sat quietly in the back seat, huddled together against the door, Oskar in the middle between Eli and Hannah. Hannah, still trembling, held onto Oskar tightly. “Eli, you saved my life...again,” she whispered.

“Papa saved your life.” Eli smiled at her.

Hannah, I was so frightened for you. I could see him coming and I felt so helpless; I could see him reaching for you; I could hear him thinking about what he was going to do to you. Oskar’s eyes filled with tears. He impulsively leaned over and kissed her, then quickly pulled back. “I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” his face turned beet red.

“Oskar, I so absolutely love you! You are just so unbearably sweet! I’ve missed you so much!” Hannah buried her face in his chest. Her Lavender-scented hair sent him over the edge; it was just simply too much to bear.

He pulled her up against him, and burst into tears. “If anything had happened to you, I don’t know what I would have done.” He sniffled. “You were so brave! Even going there in the dark all alone was brave.” He turned to Eli. “And you! Look what you did! You went storming in and saved Hannah’s life. You knew you could have been killed! And you knew exactly how it would happen if he got hold of you! I saw him look at you after you hit him...!” He was sobbing uncontrollably by this time.

Both of them wrapped their arms around him and consoled him.

Rich smiled at Elaine. “Oskar is finally getting the attention he deserves. But I wonder if he thinks it was worth it. The fact is, without his abilities, we would all be dead now. And, once again, Oskar had to immerse himself in their darkness in order to save us. I can’t even imagine what that would be like, but he did it, unflinchingly.” He remembered how hard Oskar had fallen after the confrontation with the Other One. He glanced into the back seat, and watched as Eli gently laid his head in her lap and stroked his cheek. “It looks like Eli remembers the last time, too,” he whispered to Elaine.

Dawson gathered his thoughts together, trying to make sense of it all. “Who would have thought that there would be vampires in your old home? Had they ever visited there before?”

Elaine hesitated a moment, then nodded, “Yes, there was something that happened, but it was so long ago, I had forgotten. It was shortly after my real nightmare there began, over 40 years before you came. But under the circumstances, I remember very little about it. I remember there being...other voices in the vault, a great deal of noise and movement. In retrospect, we should have realized it, however. Why else the banquet table? The meeting areas? The sheer size of the vault? We should have thought it through more thoroughly, and destroyed it all when we had the chance. Now, it may be too late. They’re here and they know that someone knows they’re here. I have no idea what they may do next.”

Rich put his finger to his lips as he realized the children had fallen silent.

“Papa, we need to call Jason. He needs to know that Hannah is okay.”

“First things first, Eli.” He turned to Hannah. “We need to call your parents at once. They’re frightened out of their minds. My only concern is how they will take all this. They won’t believe any of it, and it will estrange us from them even more.”

“You can’t tell them! You simply can’t”

“I’m not going to leave them hanging, Hannah. They’re worried to death. It’ll take us another half hour to get home. I’m simply not going to wait.” He pulled into a gas station, and pulled out his phone.

“Wait!” Eli grabbed his wrist. “I have an idea! We could take her to Hyde Park. That’s only a few blocks from here! We could call her parents from there and tell them that she called me, and we are on our way to pick her up right now, since we’re so much closer.” Rich nodded at Elaine and she pulled out into traffic.

“And I could take a bunch of pictures so Mom and Dad would believe me!”

“It wouldn’t work, Hannah.” Elaine said. “You’ve been gone too long for that. They’ll want to know where you’ve been all this time. And why you went in the first place.”

“They’ll believe me, Mrs. Dawson. I’ve always told them the truth. They don’t believe I would lie to them.”

Elaine sighed, then turned left on Baker Street off Marylebone. Oskar glanced up and saw the sign on the corner “Sherlock Holmes Museum” with an arrow pointing to the right. He and dad had visited it several times over the years. For just a moment, he wondered how Holmes would have handled a situation like this. It probably would have bored him, he decided. Not enough of a challenge.

“Can you do that Hannah? I know how close you are to your family. I don’t want you to be hurt by this. Perhaps it would be better to just tell them the truth...”

“NO! I mean...I’m sorry Mr. Dawson. But I have to do this! Eli is too important to me. I won’t make things worse. I did a stupid thing and I won’t have you all pay the price for it. I won’t!” she folder her arms across her chest. “In fact, maybe you should just leave me there and let them pick me up. Then there would be no way they could think you were lying to them.”

“No!” Eli, Oskar and Elaine said in unison. Elaine turned right on Bayswater.

“They’re right Hannah. There is absolutely no way we’re going to leave you here alone,” Dawson said. Elaine turned right on Porchester Terrace and pulled over to the curb, across the street from the gas station. She put her finger to her lips as Richard called.

“Nils! She’s just called Eli from a gas station across from Kensington Gardens. Where are you?” He listened for a moment, then “I think Elaine and I should pick her up and bring her right home. I’ll call you as soon as we have her.” Another pause. “She wouldn’t talk to us, and she told Eli

that she had to see her. She was angry that we were involved and told Eli that if we didn't bring her, she wouldn't show herself. She pointed out, quite correctly, that Hyde Park is quite large, and that we'd never find her. ...No details. ... Eli told us on her own. We knew nothing about it. I thought you should know that. ...You're quite welcome."

"Hannah, you and Eli run on across the street and take as many photos as you can, quickly." He watched as they scurried across the street, hopped the closed gate and disappeared into the darkness.

"I really don't like this at all, Elaine. We shouldn't have lied to them. It's just another thing we'll have to square with them when this is all over."

"I understand, Rich. But I also know you're a sucker for a pretty face. That's how Eli has kept you wrapped around her little finger for so long. And Hannah! You're no match for the both of them." She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Then, what's your excuse?" He grinned at her. "You're driving, yet you did exactly as she asked."

"Shut up, Rich."

Oskar sat quietly in the back seat, trying to forget what he had just been through; trying to get the terrible feel of them all out of his mind. But listening to Mom and Dad sparing with each other, made him smile. He had always been in awe of both of them, but especially Dad. He couldn't understand how he could be so kind and impulsively generous, like when he took them in unhesitatingly, or when he practically dragged Elaine into their lives 'kicking and screaming' as Eli put it, even before he knew her that well. And then turn around and, coldly and calculatingly, plan the death of the Other One. How could he appear to be so 'nice,' and yet be so strong? Just thinking about it made him feel warm... and safe. "Dad? What are we going to do about...them?"

"I don't know yet Oskar. But we can't just leave them there. I won't have it!"

"Well, it isn't exactly your call, is it Rich? They could already be gone. Actually, they would be pretty stupid to stay after being discovered. They're probably scattered by now. We've probably lost any chance to do anything. And you have to accept the fact that vampires do exist in the rest of the world, and in significant numbers. It stands to reason."

"They'll stay, Mom," Oskar said. "They're...very set in their ways. That place is a tradition with them. They've come here every 40 years without exception for over 200 years, and another place in Sweden every 40 years. They alternate every 20 years, if that makes any sense."

They were both looking at him now, "Oskar, when did you have time to get all that?! You looked pretty busy to me, just keeping us all informed...and alive."

“When you were driving, Mom. The one that calls himself *Den Tredje*, the one you burned, Dad, was talking to *Den Fjärde*. They were already planning the repairs. And their strategy. They’ve already decided that we’re most likely responsible for *Den Andra*’s death.” He hesitated. “That’s what they called ‘The Other One.’”

“That’s too bad. I’d hoped I’d killed him.” Dawson said, angrily.

“It doesn’t matter, Rich. You saved us. He undoubtedly would have killed Hannah, then Eli; and it would have been quite fast, before you interrupted him. But he knew you were the more formidable foe. He wouldn’t have wasted any time on them.

“Please! Don’t!” Oskar put his hands over his ears.

Damn! Won’t I ever learn? She leaned into the back seat and put her arms around him, then held his face in her hands. “Oskar, I forgot to thank you for our lives. You saved us all, you know, including Hannah and Eli. You were the bravest of us.

“No Mom, I was a coward! I shouted and fussed while you all...did what you did...what you always do. I know that if he had taken Hannah and Eli, I would have been frozen to the ground and would have watched him kill them both. I’m a coward still, even after I have everything I could ever want, and know how important you all are to me, and how much I love you all.” He put his head in his hands.

“Oskar, you have always had a gentle soul.” Dad said, softly. “But don’t mistake that for cowardice. Have you forgotten Seth? Have you forgotten The Other One? Your bravery has been proven to me conclusively by your actions; not by your fears. I have no doubt...” he put his hands on Oskar’s shoulders, “...no doubt whatsoever, that if you had been looking him directly in the eyes when he went for Hannah, that you would have taken action. Don’t you ever doubt it. I certainly don’t!” He leaned closer, and looked him in the eyes. “Do we understand each other? Because I’m not going to entertain this ridiculous notion of yours any further.” Oskar put his arms around him, gratefully.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“What’s wrong, Oskar?” Eli and Hannah jumped into the car from both sides, squeezing Oskar in between them. “We’re all set, Papa. Hannah took 3 rolls. We got some good ones of startled geese on Round Pond.”

Hannah giggled. “And some ducks under the bridge. But the geese didn’t have a sense of humor.” She held up her sleeve, plainly torn and with a missing button. Oskar examined it carefully, grateful for the sudden change in subject.

Elaine pointed at her watch. “We’d best get moving. We have to get you home now, Hannah.” She pulled away from the curb and headed north.

“I’m telling you, they were identical! What could it mean?” *Den Tredje* paced back and forth. “There were at least four of them. The man was called ‘Rich,’ and one of the girls was ‘Eli’ There was at least one woman and a boy outside. I heard their voices.” He paused, “But the girls! They were identical, except one of them, ‘Eli’ ...wasn’t somehow. And she’s the one who stepped forward and struck me.” He looked down at his hand and flexed it carefully. “She was fearless. It was as though I was expected, or anticipated. She looked at me as though she was totally familiar with what I was. Her twin showed fear; as did the man.”

“Why does it matter if they were twins? All that matters is that they were gone when we got there and there was no sign of them anywhere. A vehicle had been there; we could smell the exhaust, but outside on the streets we lost it almost immediately. These people knew what they were doing.” *Den Sjätte* sat down in the sixth chair.

“It matters! They were children. Why would they have been the first to approach the tomb? Humans don’t behave that way. They protect their children. They shouldn’t have been there at all.”

“Unless they didn’t know we were here.”

“Nonsense! How could a child have found the vault entrance? Or even have known it was an entrance? How could a child have even found the tomb entrance? No, they had to have known it was there. It is imperative that we find them. I’m convinced they were involved in *Den Andra*’s death. And these are no ordinary children, mark my words.”

”You’re too superstitious! It’s always been a weakness of yours!”

“I’m telling you there was something different about the one. Her eyes had that ageless look, that ancient look that we see only in our own kind. But she was mortal; or at least she seemed so. ”

“Perhaps they weren’t human at all. Perhaps they were Castor and Pollux, which would explain how one of them, as small and frail as she was, got the better of you,” *Den Sjätte* chided him. ”She was under the protection of the Gods!”

Den Tredje stood up and leaned over him threateningly, “Have you forgotten whom you’re talking to?” he hissed. *Castor and Pollux! That’s it!* He recognized the Truth of it immediately. *Pollux, an immortal, saved his brother Castor from death!*

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” *Den Sjätte* bowed his head in submission.

Den Tredje sat down slowly. “We have to proceed carefully. There’s more to this than I initially thought. Now, how will we find them based on what little we know?”

The Four were soon deep in conversation. Lying on the table between them were a soot-covered flashlight, an electric lantern, a screwdriver, and a crowbar. *Den Sjätte* turned each of them over in his hands, examining them carefully.

Chapter 3: Reconciliation.

Eli and Oskar sat alone in the car, watching through the bay window as Papa and Mama talked to Nils and Livia in the Sandstrøm's living room. "Do you think she's going to be in trouble?" Eli held Oskar's hand tightly.

"Probably. But she can take it. She's tough." Oskar said, admiringly.

"I feel so helpless. There's got to be something we can do! I can't stand this!"

"Ouch! Eli, leggo!" Oskar shook his hand. "I'm sure glad you're not a vampire anymore. I'd have one less hand now if you were."

"Well, I wish I were! I'd go in there right now, grow some fangs and show them! And now Hannah's going to get in trouble because she was trying to prove the truth to her dumb parents! It's not fair!"

Oskar resisted the temptation to give her his usual lecture about 'fairness.' Instead, he nodded his head in agreement. "You're right Eli. It's not."

They watched as the door opened and the four of them stood talking on the porch for a moment. No one was smiling. Hannah was nowhere to be seen. "Look Eli!" Oskar pointed to the upstairs window. Hannah was standing there next to Jason, waving at them. Jason gave them a thumbs up, and hugged her. They quickly stepped back from the window as Nils and Livia started up the stairs.

Rich and Elaine got into the car quietly. Elaine pulled away from the curb and turned down Tillingham Way, toward home.

"Eli, Hannah's parents are very angry. They're angry at Hannah, and they're angry at us. They feel that, intentionally or not, we've caused a major rift in their family. Both Hannah and Jason are barely speaking to them. Hannah's grades are suffering, and she's becoming defiant. They don't completely believe her explanation as to where she was, and I'm not sure they believed your mother's and my version of events either. The film may help, but I fear it won't help much. At least it will prove that she was, at least for part of the time, in Hyde Park. The rest is up to them. We'll have to wait and see if this will all blow over or not. I'm sorry!"

Oskar felt Eli go limp in his arms. "What do we do now, Papa?"

"We wait, Eli. That's all we can do. Meantime, I'll talk to Jonathan again. Maybe he can figure something out."

"In the meantime, we need to figure out what to do about the four vampires. And I know you're right, Elaine; there are certainly thousands of vampires in the world, but these four are now looking for us. We need to deal with them."

“Rich, didn’t you say that you thought Gudmund’s associate was a vampire? Perhaps we could have a talk with him...and get a different perspective. I’ve been meaning to ask you about him anyway, concerning the cure. Perhaps he would be interested, in the cure at least.”

“Excellent idea! I knew there was a reason I kept you around! I’ll call Gudmund’s lawyer tomorrow morning. I’m sure he can put me in touch with him.”

Oskar was thinking fast and furiously. Dad had way too much confidence in him. He knew with a certainty that he couldn’t bear to go through the deaths of four of them. He hadn’t told anyone but Eli about how horrible it had been when the Other One actually died. He had been there in his mind when the end came, and he had almost screamed aloud when he felt his soul literally disintegrate around him like a shattered stained-glass window. He had wondered at the time, at the stark, breath-taking beauty of it, but after all, according to God, aren’t all souls beautiful on some level? After all, He made them all, didn’t He? And if they were flawed, wouldn’t He, at least partially, be to blame? These thoughts always confused him and made him feel uneasy, because he knew he must be wrong, but it seemed so logical... “Dad, do you think we could cure them? Wouldn’t that work just as well? They couldn’t hurt us if they were cured.”

Dawson turned around and looked at him, surprised. “Good thinking, Oskar; you got right to the heart of the matter. It’s certainly an option that’s high on my list. But the biggest problem that presents us is, who’s going to bell the cat?”

“Maybe Gudmund’s associate, if we can talk him into it; but we certainly can’t count on it.” Elaine said. “And we need to know where they sleep. I have some ideas, but it’ll mean we have to do some quite dangerous reconnaissance. A vampire’s sleep is quite deep during certain parts of its sleep cycle, but they’re smart enough to stagger them, now that they know they’ve been discovered. But Oskar can help us with that problem...”

“I think that’s enough for tonight.” Dawson said, as Elaine pulled into the driveway. “We all need to get some sleep. Are you kids okay?”

“I’m fine, Papa. Oskar?”

“I’m...okay, Dad.” He headed for the front door, with Eli close behind him.

Eli was already in bed when Oskar finished his shower. He came in and quietly slipped in next to her. She took his hands in hers. “Talk to me Oskar.” She whispered.

“Eli, I’m really scared. Before, when I was scared, I could deal with it, because I knew you and Mom were so strong. You couldn’t hardly be hurt. But now you can; you’re no stronger than I am. I don’t know if I can do this again.”

“Yes you can, Oskar. Because you must.”

“I can’t lose you, Eli. I’d die if you were killed, and you almost were! I...he looked right at you! He was about to leap out and grab you by the neck, and you would have been dead in an instant.

I saw it in his mind!” his hand shook as he reached up and touched her cheek. “I’m not strong like you.”

She kissed him gently. She didn’t know what to say to him. *Oskar, you were brave before because you thought I couldn’t die? But YOU could have. Why didn’t that scare you?*

Because it didn’t matter, if you lived.

She was overwhelmed by his totally unassuming lack of pretense. *How can anyone think like that? I don’t deserve you, Oskar.*

Yes, you do!

He burst out laughing. “Boy, did that ever sound stupid!”

Eli grinned at him. “Yeah, it kind of did, didn’t it? But I know what you meant.”

She laid her head on his chest and closed her eyes. *Hannah’s right, Oskar. You are so... she didn’t have the words; Sweet? Kind? Unselfish? Oskar, you are so absolutely beautiful, I can’t stand it!*

Don’t be silly... He always got a bit uncomfortable when Eli was like this. It was as though she were talking about someone else; it certainly wasn’t him. He was nothing like that. But he really liked how it made him feel so close to her.

Finally, they drifted off, and together they dreamed that Eli was the fairy princess, and Oskar was the dragon slayer who rescued her from its flaming jaws and carried her off to his castle. And Eli loved him for it, and let him do it---this time.

§

Four well-dressed men walked quietly into the library, sat down at a small table near the entrance for a few minutes talking quietly to one another, then rose and spread out purposefully through the stacks. One talked quietly to the librarian; another collected a pile of phonebooks from the reference section and began going through them quietly at one of the massive oak tables that lined the outer walls. The other two began going through old newspapers on microfiche.

The librarian nodded, “As long as I’ve been here, there’s always been an interest in Vampires. In fact, so much so that we keep a selection of books on the subject, including old history books, books on folklore and legends, and novels. There are even a few books on the evolution and symbolism of Vampires in the art world.” He pointed to a shelf near the front door. “It’s over there, right next to the section on Werewolves and other mythological bad guys. But Vampires seem to have more staying power than the others.”

“Why do you suppose that is?” *Den Tredje* asked, not really caring what the answer was. Being friendly with the librarian might produce other means of following up on the few solid leads they now had. And they were leaving no stone unturned.

“I think it’s partly because there are vampires in the real world.”

Den Tredje looked up at him quickly. He now had his full attention. “What do you mean?”

The librarian chuckled. “I get that same reaction from the kids. Vampires are a kind of hobby of mine. And there’s nothing more likely to get children interested in reading than stimulating their imaginations. I try to collect articles about mysteries in the real world that could be used to bolster the idea that such things might actually exist. That’s all it takes with the children. Just the remotest possibility that these things could exist, and they’re hooked!”

“For example?”

“Well, for starters, I bring up vampire bats, complete with all the legends surrounding them, and graphic photos, showing their fangs, in detail. But that’s just the beginning. I bring out texts documenting two famous vampire cases, the first to be officially recorded, involving the corpses of Peter Plogojowitz and Arnold Paole in Serbia, around 1725. The cases were well-documented and generally believed by all at the time. It came to be known as the ‘18th-Century Vampire Controversy.’ The very idea that a whole generation of Europeans were dead certain that vampires existed is food for thought and the kids eat it up.” He chuckled at his own joke.

“But there has to be more than that,” *Den Tredje* interjected. These are modern times. People were superstitious back then; they’d believe almost anything, and the kids would certainly realize that.”

“True enough. I really don’t expose children to these ideas unless they are teens. The younger ones aren’t ready for such things, and you’re right; the older ones can be quite skeptical. So I discuss the singular attributes of vampires one at a time and show them that at least some of them exist, albeit as individual symptoms, in people alive today.” He paused. “For example, some people have quite pronounced eye-teeth, which could be vestigial vampiric traits, in long-dead vampire ‘relatives.’” He winked at him. “They’re still not too old to consider that a possibility. And the sensitivity that some people have to sunlight. There are many examples of this. I have a collection of newspaper articles about some of these, and new ones appear in magazines and newspapers all the time.” He took a thick well-worn folder out from under the desk and laid it on the counter. “Here are some of the better ones.” He thumbed through them quickly. “Here’s one about an unfortunate child who was so sensitive to light, including most artificial light, that he could only be exposed to candlelight. Sadly, he died of skin cancer at the age of 19. But my favorite, and the most uplifting, was that of an adopted young girl whose father was quite innovative. He actually devised special clothing that allowed her to go out in the daytime.” He pulled out an old magazine article and spread it out in front of him. “Back in 1983, it was. He made a suit of clothing for her of MPET. You know, the material that Space Blankets are made of? That’s probably why the article was written, since it was the first time the material had been used for that purpose. This was, however, the only article I could find, since the father, a

professor at Oxford at the time, valued their privacy, and was actually quite incensed that the article had been published in the first place. The article contains the only picture of her I was ever able to find. I always wondered what finally happened to her. I hope she's doing well."

Den Tredje glanced at the photograph, then did a double-take. Her face was distorted through the visor but there was no mistaking it. He took a deep breath. *It's her! It's the girl from the tomb; the one called 'Eli!' The one who struck me. And this photo was taken 13 years ago. She's immortal! And almost certainly a vampire!* His head spun. But there were too many contradictions. Eli wasn't immortal; he was sure of it, in spite of her eyes. But here she was. How could that be? And her twin. Not immortal. Another impossibility. And if she were a vampire, why hadn't she used her abilities against him? "May I have a copy of this? It's quite intriguing, I must admit. I would like to find more information about her. And keep up the good work! If all librarians were as committed and as innovative as you are, illiteracy in London would disappear overnight."

"Of course you may! And thank you for the compliment. And please, if you find anything new about her please let me know. For the kids." He winked at him as he headed for the copier.

Den Tredje was still stinging from *Den Sjätte's* continued sarcasm at the ease with which Eli had bested him. And it was contagious; the others were also beginning to show disrespect. He would keep this jewel of information to himself, at least until he could present her and her associates to them himself, alive or otherwise. That would end all this once and for all.

§

"Oskar, I've got to go. Don't try and stop me." Eli slipped on her backpack and headed for the door.

"Eli, please. Let's talk to Mom and Dad first." Oskar took her hand and gently pulled her back into the room.

Oskar, you know I'm going to go. And I have to do this alone. I think they might talk to me because...I look like Hannah to them." She looked at her watch. "It's 8:00PM. I can just catch the 8:10 bus. I promise I'll call you as soon as I get there safely," she assured him.

"Okay, Eli, but if I don't hear from you by 9:00, I'm going to Dad. Okay?"

"Deal."

Oskar was quiet as they slipped down the stairs and carefully tiptoed past the living room where Mama and Papa were watching television. He waved to her as the bus disappeared around the corner, and quietly slipped back upstairs, unnoticed.

§

“I’m here Oskar. And I’m safe. I’m...on the sidewalk in front of the house,” Eli whispered into the phone.



Hannah’s House

“I wish I were there with you Eli. Are you going to be okay?”

“I think so. But I’ll call when I start for home. Don’t worry.” She slipped the phone back into her backpack.

Eli took a deep breath and walked slowly up the familiar brick sidewalk to the Sandstrøm house. She could see Hannah through the big bay window, sitting on the couch with Jason, watching TV. She rang the bell.

“Hannah, see who that is,” Livia called out.

Eli's heart was pounding. She hadn't seen Hannah for almost two weeks. It had been an unbearable period for her, as every attempt to repair the damage had been rebuffed by Hannah's parents. They had only allowed Hannah one phone call to Eli, and that had been monitored by Nils.

The door opened. Hannah took one look at Eli, then rushed forward and put her arms around her. "Oh Eli! I've missed you so much!" She stepped back, "Is something wrong? Did something happen? Why are you here?"

"I had to come, Hannah. I had to...see you again."

Livia stepped up to the door quickly, "Eli, you know you're not supposed to be here. Did your parents put you up to this? We had an agreement..."

"Please don't be angry, Mrs. Sandstrøm. Mama and Papa don't know where I am. I came on my own; I promise! Please, can I talk to Hannah?"

Livia hesitated a moment, "I'm sorry Eli. I know this isn't your fault, but I can't let this continue. I know this is difficult for you, but try to understand. I'll call your parents and tell them you're... outside waiting for them. I'm sorry. I'll leave the porch light on for you." She gently closed the door.

"Mom! You can't just leave her out there like that! It's not right!"

"Hannah, I simply can't allow this to go on. We have to put a stop to this. She has to learn to accept it. I'll go call Richard right now."

"I hate you! How could you do this? She saved my life twice! Doesn't that count for something? You know how much I love her!" Hannah ran upstairs sobbing. Jason gave his mom a dirty look and quickly followed Hannah.

Our whole family has been divided by these people. Why can't they just leave us alone? Livia sat down on the window seat for a moment and watched Eli as she paced back and forth on the small lawn. Finally, she sat down against the hedge, put her face in her hands, slumped over on the ground, and curled up in a ball, crying.

Livia's heart broke for her, in spite of herself. *What am I doing? It's not this poor child's fault. And she is just a child. I don't believe any of this nonsense!* She got up, quietly slipped out the front door and walked quickly over to Eli as she lay on the grass.

She knelt down next to her. "Eli? I've..."

Eli put her arms around her neck. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble, but I just had to see Hannah. She saved me, don't you understand?"

Livia took her by the hand and helped her up off the ground. “Come in Eli. I’m sorry. I lost sight of what’s important; and you’ve always been a good friend to Hannah. None of this is your fault. You can come wait for your parents in the house.” She put her arm around her and they walked into the house together. “Now you just sit here on the couch and I’ll call them for you.”

Hannah moved quietly down the stairs and sat down beside Eli as Livia disappeared into the kitchen. They smiled at each other, then Eli laid her head in Hannah’s lap and closed her eyes.

“Kindred spirits.” Hannah whispered as she stroked her hair.

Livia sat down opposite them. “Your father was quite upset, and apologized profusely. He’s on his way.” *And I’m sure he didn’t know she was coming. He’s been so...up front with us in spite of our distrust. Neither of them has said a harsh word to us in spite of some of the things we’ve said to them. I really don’t understand this at all. They seem like such wonderful, well-grounded parents, except...*

“Eli, could I ask you some questions? Would that be all right?”

“Anything! You can ask me anything. And I promise I’ll tell you the truth. I promise.” She sat up and put her hands in her lap, twisting her fingers together nervously. Hannah put her arm around her.

“How old are you, Eli?”

“I’m thirteen.” She hesitated, “But I promised I’d tell you the truth. I was born November 29, 1750.” She looked up at Livia anxiously. “But I really can’t remember what day I was born. I lived alone for so long that I forgot. I had to leave home after I was taken away...I was alone for a very long time, before I found Oskar...and Papa. He took us both in and took care of us. Papa helped me find my birthday.” She stopped. “I don’t know why I’m 13, but I am. I just know it; I can’t explain how it works. Please believe me. You have to believe me!”

“Eli, it’s okay. I...believe you.” *She really believes this. Could it really be true?* “You said you were taken away from your family? By whom? And why?” *I wish Nils were here. I really need him right now.*

“Please! I can’t tell you. I know you won’t believe me and then you’ll hate me even more. I couldn’t bear that! I just want things to be back the way they were. Back when I was welcome in your home, and you liked us all. I’m sorry I’m what I am. I wish I could be anything else, but I can’t.”

“Stop it! Eli don’t say such terrible things.” Hannah put her arms around her and hugged her. “Mom, she’s right. You won’t believe her. You can’t because you didn’t see what I saw.”

Livia was torn. Everything seemed to ring true to her. As impossible as it seemed, Eli was almost certainly telling the truth. And her own daughter, her usually sensible, insightful daughter believed her.

“And I had to do ... terrible things to survive all those years. Really terrible things! And Oskar and Papa helped me to stop.” She looked down at her feet, ashamed.

Vampire! She’s talking about things she had to do as a vampire! An eternal 12-year-old vampire, alone for over two centuries! She sat back in her chair and looked at her, seeing her in a whole new light. And she felt so terribly sad for her; for this tiny guilt-ridden innocent-looking mass-murderer. *How can I possibly feel sorry for her? I can’t even imagine the trail of death she’s left behind her; yet I do. I can’t help it. Is it just because she looks like my own daughter?* But she knew that wasn’t it. She didn’t know exactly why, but she knew that wasn’t it.

Hannah sensed the change in her mother. “She’s my fairy, you know. She saved my life. Twice. She really did, Mom. She saved me when I slipped and fell from my tree, that first night we met.” She paused, then took a deep breath. “And she saved me from being...raped and maybe even killed by three boys at Old Finchleians that first time she spent the night here.”

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?” Livia quickly moved over to the couch and sat down next to Hannah.

“Eli and I were lying in the field talking; you know, like Jason and I used to do? These three older boys surprised us in the dark. We had walked past them on the way to the field, so I guess they followed us. Eli fought with one of them so I could get away. He hit her hard and I thought she was hurt really bad. I climbed the big Oak tree behind the clubhouse, and Eli finally got away from them and came up after me.”

“But...how did you finally get away? All they had to do was go up after you.”

Hannah looked directly at her and squeezed her hand tightly. “Eli took off her shirt and asked me to trust her. Then she put her arms by her sides, raised them up over her head, and grew these absolutely beautiful velvety wings. Then I climbed on her back and we flew! We flew over the field, over Richy Johnson’s house, and landed on the green. She’s my fairy, and she saved my life.” She turned around and kissed Eli on the cheek.

“You should have seen her, Mrs. Sandstrøm!” Eli said excitedly, “She was so brave! When she thought I was going to be hurt by one of the boys, she was going to come down the tree to save me. She could have been killed, but she was going to come down anyway. I love her so!”

Livia suddenly knew with a certainty that they were telling her the truth. “Eli, what else did you do that you’re not telling me? Hannah?”

“I don’t know, Mom; Eli flew back and ... I heard some loud noises like firecrackers, then she came back. She was only gone for a few minutes, but she told me they’d never bother anyone again.”

Livia looked at Eli intently. “Eli, did you have anything to do with three boys found naked in that very same Oak tree several months ago?” *The very night she stayed over*, Livia realized. *Why hadn’t I made the connection before?*

“They claimed that someone robbed them at gunpoint, threw their clothes on the roof of the clubhouse and fired several shots into the tree. All believable initially, but when the gun was found to have belonged to one of the boy’s fathers, their story fell apart. And not one of them has broken their silence since.” *And the only crime they had committed, other than nudity in a public place, was discharging a firearm, which is why we actually didn’t hear about it for over a month.*

Yes Mrs. Sandstrøm. I did it. I couldn’t...you know, because of Hannah; so I just scared them.”

She couldn’t ...what? She’s saying she couldn’t kill them; and of course she couldn’t. She couldn’t do that and protect Hannah from the resulting fallout. But Livia shuddered at the thought that Eli had even entertained the idea.

She didn’t know what to say. This strange, dark, ageless child had saved Hannah’s life. This impossible child. This child that was, in essence, Hannah. Her child.

“Thank you for saving Hannah for us, Eli, I...thank you,” she whispered, hoarsely.

“And Eli gave me something else, Mom,” Hannah rushed up the stairs and returned with her copy of the family tree. “She gave me this.” She spread it out on the coffee table.

Livia recognized Jason’s and Hannah’s names at the top of the tree, then followed it down, mentally checking the names: Nil’s parents, grandparents, and...her heart skipped a beat. Nils’ mother had three children. Not two, as all other members of their family had thought. Nils had told only her about his mother’s other child; the one she had at 17, that was put up for adoption. It had been a well-kept family secret, yet here it was on this mysterious family tree, which obviously stretched all the way back to Eli’s family, and possibly even beyond that. She smiled to herself. *All the way back to Eli’s family. I guess this means I’ve accepted her age. And now I’ve accepted what she is—or was. What’s next?*

“Eli, where did you get this?”

“It’s a copy of this one.” She pulled the original, much larger one, out of her backpack and spread it across the table. Livia could tell it was quite old just by looking at the discolored, frayed borders and the ornate scrollwork near the bottom. “And I’d much rather Papa explained it to you when he picks me up, if you’ll let him.” She looked at her anxiously. “Please, Mrs. Sandstrøm! Please give him a chance!”

“Mom, you have to listen to him! What can it hurt?”

“Stop, both of you! I’m convinced. Don’t worry, Hannah, I’ll talk to your dad. This is over as far as I’m concerned. Eli, can you ever ever forgive us?” She took her in her arms and hugged her

tightly. The implied darkness of Eli's past still frightened her, but she had saved Hannah's life. That alone made everything else ... unimportant.

Eli was so happy. It was like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. And Hannah's mom had come through, just as Papa had hoped. All she could see was Hannah's beaming face. Nothing could make this moment more perfect than it was now, unless...

The devil rose up in her once again. "I do have one other thing I'd like to show you, if that's okay." She smiled at Hannah, as she went through her backpack. *She'll believe me. I know it!*

"Of course, Eli. What is it?"

Eli handed her an 8x10 framed photo, one that Hannah recognized immediately. "Eli, I don't think..."

Livia couldn't understand what she was looking at, at first. Then she gasped as she recognized Eli. And Elaine. Naked. With wings spread. Elaine's feet were already off the ground. She stared at it a moment, then, hands shaking, gently laid it on the coffee table. She realized if she had seen this twenty minutes ago, she would have been furious. But now... "Hannah, you told us, but we wouldn't believe you. Now, I think I have no choice." She looked at it again closely, fascinated. "How absolutely beautiful you both are..." she whispered.

"Isn't it a beautiful picture, Mom? I call it 'Fairies in flight.' Eli is my fairy, you know. And she's her mama's Butterfly."

"'Butterfly!' So that's where that nickname came from!" Livia exclaimed. She realized she was in their world now, for better or for worse. Was Nils ever going to be surprised when she called him.

"That was when she gave it to me, Mrs. Sandstrøm. It was the first time I ever flew with her."

"Eli? Who took the picture?"

"A really old friend. But I'll have Papa explain it all to you when he gets here, okay?" She rested her head on Hannah's shoulder.

"Would you two excuse me for a few minutes? I have an important phone call to make." Livia went into the kitchen.

"Say 'Hi' to Dad for us, Mom" Hannah grinned at Eli and winked.

Chapter 4: The Sacrifice

“You two had better wait here. I’ll go get her.” Dawson headed up the sidewalk. He could see Hannah and Eli, backs to him, sitting on the sofa. Livia had Eli’s hand in hers. Jason was standing beside her, smiling. Could this be a good sign? He could only hope. After all, Eli still seemed to have her almost magical powers of persuasion, which, before her cure, he had at least partially attributed to her vampirism, largely because Elaine seemed to have the same ability. But, even after the cure, they were both still able to work their magic on him, he had soon realized. He smiled to himself at the thought.

Livia spotted him through the window, rose quickly and headed for the door. She opened it even before he had stepped up on the porch. “Richard! Come in. I ... owe you an apology. And I’m so sorry! But you have to understand...”

“Oh Papa! She believes me!” Eli rushed past her and hugged him. “Everything’s okay now! Where’s Oskar? And Mama? Are they here?”

“Yes, of course they are!” Dawson smiled as he put his arms around her, then looked up at Livia, “You have nothing to be sorry about. The bumbling way we presented Eli’s situation to you would have elicited the same response from Elaine and I, had we been in your position. This is all our fault and the children were the unwilling victims of our mistake. I apologize to you and Nils for putting you through this and causing so much conflict in your family.” He paused, “But you must realize the conflict is a testament to the strength of character you’ve instilled in your own children. You should both be proud of them.”

Livia smiled at him. “Eli has told us many times that you always seem to know just what to say. But I am not going to stand here and let you and Elaine take all the blame. Nils and I should have at least let you have your say. Again, I apologize. And please, tell Elaine and Oskar to join us.”

Eli brushed past them and ran out to the car, “Oskar! Mama! Everything’s good now! Hannah’s mom says you can both come in!” She grabbed Oskar’s arm and pulled him, stumbling, out of the car and up the sidewalk. Elaine followed quickly behind.

Elaine gasped as she spotted the framed photo on the coffee table. “Eli, you shouldn’t have ...” she blushed, then picked it up quickly. “Rich, put this away, please.”

Livia smiled at her, “I’m not in the least offended, Elaine. In fact, it’s an absolutely beautiful photograph. The photographer is quite talented. There’s not a hint of perniciousness here.” She hesitated, “And I think it was Eli’s way of proving to me how wrong I had been; right Eli?”

“No! I mean...I wouldn’t...”

“You’re too much like Hannah, Eli. You can’t fool me any more than you can fool your mother. But I forgive you; I deserved it.”

Eli grinned at her. “I like you, Mrs. Sandstrøm. I like you a lot.”

“And how could I not like you? You’re my second Hannah.” She kissed her on the forehead.

“Hannah, Jr.” Jason said, in mock seriousness.

“What about Nils?” Richard asked. “Have you spoken to him yet?”

“I just got off the phone with him. After recounting the story of their escape from the three boys at the field, and a few other things I chose to tell him, he was convinced. He’ll be home tomorrow.”

“We all need to get together as soon as possible.” Dawson said, somberly. “There have been some new developments that you all need to be aware of. And we also have to discuss Eli’s procedure. She has refused to get her implant until Hannah could be with her; and you and Nils also. She considers you all a part of her family and she wanted you all to be there.”

“My God, Eli! You were waiting for us to change our minds? This is too important for that. What if I hadn’t believed you?”

“But you did! And I knew you would. Gudmund told us you would...”

“Who’s Gudmund?”

“I think perhaps that part of the story should wait until Nils is back.” Dawson interjected. “That way we can answer all your questions at once; and I’m sure you have many. But I can tell you that he was the one who took that beautiful photograph.”

“Now, I’m even more intrigued, Richard.” She turned to Elaine, “May I ask you a few questions, Elaine? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to...”

“Ask me anything, Livia. You have every right to know everything. After all, your daughter is a member of our family now, as are you all.”

“How old are you? And how long have you been...I mean, how long were you a vampire?”

“I’m 26, physically. But I’ve lived for 79 years.”

“And you and Eli are now completely cured? Everything’s gone?”

“Yes, Livia, everything’s gone. We’re both rid of it forever. And we’re immune to reinfection, it turns out.”

“You don’t have to answer this, but...have you...I mean...Eli told us that she had to...No, I’m not going to ask. Please forgive me; it’s neither the time nor the place...” she stammered.
Especially not in front of the children.

Elaine looked at her intently for a moment, hesitated, then...“You have to understand, Livia. Being a vampire means you have involuntarily given a part of yourself over to a very dark and powerful force. It’s dark, not because it’s evil; but because it’s amoral and mindless. It’s dark the way a volcanic eruption is dark. It does what it does, consequences be damned. And it’s always up close and personal. There’s no avoiding it or ignoring it, and it never goes away, and it never gets any easier. And years of regret, centuries in Eli’s case, do nothing to relieve you of the guilt, even though you know it’s beyond your control. Because in the back of your mind, you know you could stop it all just by stepping outside in the sunlight; consequently, every day you don’t, makes the burden more impossibly difficult to bear...” her voice broke.

Eli rose quickly, brushed past Livia, curled up in Elaine’s lap and put her arms around her. Elaine rubbed her back gently. “And my sweet Butterfly had to bear this burden for over 200 years, eternally 12 years old, friendless, and aching alone. She abandoned her loving family, rather than allow them to see what she had become and risk exposing them to the wrath of the vile creature who made her what she was. And, ironically, she outlived them all. And only because of Oskar’s love for her, did she find the inner strength to seek help. And, miraculously, they found it in Richard, the kindest, most gentle, understanding man I’ve ever known.”

“Jason? Hannah? Go upstairs please.” Livia whispered.

“Mom, Oskar showed me everything months ago. And I’ve told Jason. Please, let us stay,” Hannah pleaded, softly.

Livia nodded, reluctantly. “I see my stubbornness has forced me to play ‘catch-up’ with my own children on this.” She turned to Dawson, “Richard, why DID you take them in? Weren’t you frightened when you found out what she was?”

“I was...but I saw in her, first and foremost, a frightened child; a desperate child, who wanted her humanity back more than anything else in the world. And I knew she was worth the risk. If Oskar could see past her darkness so clearly, wouldn’t I be less of a human being if I couldn’t? Oskar had his own demons, but he was right, and I knew it almost from the beginning. And it was the same with Elaine, although with her it took me a bit longer to be sure. I had the children to protect at that point, so I was a bit more cautious.”

“Not nearly as cautious as I was, Rich, if you remember correctly.”

“Yes, I do remember. I dragged you into our lives ‘kicking and screaming’ as Eli put it. But, as with them, I have absolutely no regrets.” He took her hands in his and squeezed them.

“Mrs. Sandstrøm? Can Hannah spend the night with us tonight?” Oskar asked. “It’s Friday. There’s no school tomorrow.”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea, Oskar. At least not tonight. We have a lot of talking to do and I have apologies to make to my children. But soon, I promise.” She glanced up at Hannah, who nodded, smiling.

§

Den Tredje thumbed through the list, disgusted. “It will take us years to go through all these. We’ve got to narrow it down even more.” He paused, “So. From the lantern you got ‘Property of Nils S, Manchester;’ from the flashlight, ‘Hannah S;’ and from the screwdriver, ‘N S’?”

“Correct. And at the DIY store, we were told that model lantern hasn’t been sold for over 15 years, but was a popular item for 10 years before that. The flashlight is still sold.” *Den Fjärde* said, as he mentally checked off each item.

“Nothing from the crowbar?”

“No, nothing. It’s still being sold, however, as is the screwdriver.”

“Let’s go over what we know, then. The girls are Eli, and probably Hannah. Nils can’t be the boy I heard; the lantern is too old. The ‘S’ could indicate that Hannah and this ‘Nils’ are related somehow. Perhaps their father?” He didn’t think so, but they should verify it one way or another. “And the woman. The fact that she called him ‘Rich’ means she knows him well. His wife perhaps?”

“How about ‘Rich’? If we assume they’re all related somehow, then we could make another list comprising all listings of Rich or Richard S. from the Manchester area phonebooks.” *Den Femte* offered.

“I’ll look into that myself. I’ll let you know what I find out.” *Den Tredje* interjected. The article about the light-sensitive girl, ‘Eli,’ he was certain, had been disappointingly vague – no address or names. All he knew for sure was that the family lived in or near London, there was a sibling, a boy, and the father, a professor at Oxford, was a widower, who was bringing up the children on his own. He had his own list of Riches and Richards who had taught at Oxford at that time. A much shorter list than *Den Sjätte*’s, he thought to himself, smugly. He had a significant number of house calls to make over the next few weeks, after a bit of reconnaissance. The fact that this professor was a widower should narrow the list down even further. *Perhaps if I can find his photograph in an old yearbook, it will confirm my belief that Rich is Eli’s and Hannah’s father...*

“Does anyone have any thoughts as to why they picked that particular time to visit us? And why they would send in the weakest and most vulnerable of them first, and alone? Her hair was caught when the slab slipped back in place, and, as far as we can tell, it was a full 15 minutes before anyone else tried to help her. She actually wasn’t freed until I lifted the slab.”

“I still think it might have been a chance encounter. Simply a curious, thrill-seeking child, finally found by her parents. That would explain why she was alone. She hadn’t anticipated our presence.” *Den Sjätte* simply was not convinced there was any more to it than that.

“I strongly disagree with all of that...except, perhaps, for the last. Indeed, she may not have known we were here. But I’m certain she knew of the vault, at least, for reasons I’ve given

before.” He paused, “Yes! That must be it. She came to the vault, not knowing we were there. But for what purpose?”

“I think it’s pointless to ponder it. She’s a child. She probably had a child’s reasons; something unimportant. And the others came to retrieve her; it’s probably as simple as that,” *Den Sjätte* said, a bit irritated. “We’re wasting time going down that path.”

“Are we now? Then how do you explain how quickly and aggressively they reacted to our presence, and how quickly they escaped? It was almost as though they had anticipated our every move, once they were aware of our presence. I tell you, no matter why Hannah was there, her sister at least, and the others have dealt with our kind before!” he was inwardly seething. He was getting tired of having to deal with *Den Sjätte*’s youthful arrogance.

Den Sjätte sat down slowly, recognizing how close he had once again come to bringing *Den Trejde*’s wrath down upon him. “I’ll have to agree with you. It did seem to be more than luck. ” Secretly, he didn’t agree at all. They had just been lucky, and this whole exercise was a waste of time. He felt strongly that they should pursue other avenues, such as the unexplained disappearance of *Den Andra*’s prisoner, Elaine, and the disappearance of his photographer and confidant. The photographer had vanished suddenly over 13 years ago, according to his business partner. *And why were all the journals and photo albums missing?* He was certain the answer to the mystery of Den Andra’s death would be found by pursuing those clues, rather than that of an insignificant wayward child. If she and her family were really involved, why would they have waited 13 years to revisit the vault? The undisturbed dust on the floor indicated it hadn’t been visited for many, many years. If this odd mix of at least 3 children and 2 or more adults didn’t know vampires were here, as *Den Trejde* had finally acknowledged, why else would they have come at this time? *Pure coincidence! Nothing more!* He was certain of it.

§

They all sat together at their big dining room table. Nils and Livia sat apprehensively across from Oskar and Eli.

Detached, Eli could hear Papa’s voice droning in the background as he explained Oskar’s talent to the Sandströms. She could see the pool through the wide windows to the back porch as the sunlight reflected off the surface, sprinkling the walls with tiny moving jewels of sunlight. Her mind wandered, as she remembered those days before the cure when often, in a state of melancholy, she would deliberately stand in front of the windows, shirtless, feeling the tingling, burning sensation as the blips of reflected sunlight moved randomly across her bare skin, leaving stinging hot trails in their wake. For some reason, this confrontation with the sun, this teasing, this almost daring it to come in after her, made her feel more alive, more in tune with the real world; the dark world outside the warm, protective bubble of her new family; the world that could destroy her in an instant without warning; and indeed, she felt, wanted desperately to do just that. In discussing Probability with Papa during school hours, she knew there was a one in a trillion trillion or less chance that, if the random ripples in the pool became configured just right at a given instant, she could be struck dead by a lethal, focused beam of sunlight. Even though the odds were impossibly small, the idea still intrigued her, and on those melancholy days, she

felt as though she were giving fate a chance to rectify it's mistake: The mistake it made in the distant past to let her live, rather than die in the pit, or by Jesper's axe.

"Eli? Are you okay?" Hannah whispered.

"I'm fine, Hannah." She forced a smile. Secretly, she dreaded having to dredge up these memories and bare her innermost soul again for all to see. It had been involuntary for Papa, but in retrospect, she would have done it for him gladly, a thousand times if necessary. For Jack and Henry, it had been a bit harder. Her recent wonderful life had forced most of it into the background, making it much more painful for her when she dredged it all up again and showed them. And Hannah; her sweet Hannah! It had been terrible for the both of them. And now she had to do it again, for Hannah's parents. She was just thankful that Hannah's parents, at Papa's urging, had kept Jason out of it this time; she didn't think she could bear that. As nice and supportive as he had been, he was almost a stranger to her. Now wasn't the time. And poor Oskar. Having to channel the same awful stories over and over again, must have an effect on him, but he never once complained. But she knew it hurt him too. Everyone was hurt by it, no matter how necessary it seemed to be. Each time, Gundmund's awful father came alive again, reveling in the misery he could still cause, two centuries after his death.

"Eli, did you hear me?" Papa asked, gently. "I think we're ready. Oskar?"

Oskar took both of Eli's hands in his left hand. *I know you don't like to do this, Eli. But it will all be over in a few minutes.* He reached across the table and put his right hand on Livia's and Nils' hands and closed his eyes. And waited.

Suddenly, he and he alone, saw Eli standing on a precipice, staring down into a terrifying blackness. As he watched helplessly, she leaned forward and slowly tumbled into the dark abyss. He was suddenly terrified. Something was very wrong. This time, Eli was not only remembering her terrible past; she was reliving it. The detachment Oskar normally felt was gone, and he fell helplessly into the void after her. The searing pain of it almost overwhelmed him.

The nightmare began with a pair of deep-blue, soulless eyes staring hungrily into hers, and thundered forward relentlessly, violently tearing open old wounds, and spilling the blood of countless thousands of innocents as she silently screamed in agony, finally, mercifully, coming to an end on an old, weathered, snow-covered jungle-gym in the dead of a Swedish winter, as her fanged mouth moved slowly but decisively towards Oskar's sweet neck, just as he reached up and lovingly touched her soul.

But the sweet relief came almost too late. She could barely see him through the pain, standing there, hesitant, his cold breath mingling with hers, his beautiful face so close.

"What did you do that for?" she had asked him.

"I'm sorry ... I—"

"What did you do?" But she knew what he had done. He had saved her life, and would continue to save her life every day for the next 14 years.

She was breathing heavily now, and her heart was racing. Those last 14 years of memories rushed by, uncensored; Detective Ellstrom's brutal decapitation and the Other One's immolation marking the final victims in her two-and-a-half centuries of mass murder. She was done.

Eli put her arms around Oskar as her tears soaked his shirt. "I can't do this any more, Oskar! I just can't!" She stood up and stumbled over to the window. She couldn't bear looking at any of them just now, but she knew she had to. She turned around slowly... The room spun around and around, tilted crazily to the side, and she slipped quietly away into a warm, dark place.

She felt arms around her, pulling her this way and that; heard voices on top of voices; she smelled Hannah's Lavender hair, felt Papa's big hands on her shoulders, felt him smoothly lift her up and cradle her in his strong arms. *Eli! Eli!* She heard Oskar calling out to her in a high, panic-filled voice. Then, once again, blackness.

She felt Oskar squeeze her hand, felt the power of his relief wash over her, and through Oskar, Hannah's fear and concern. "She's awake!" he shouted.

Eli's eyes popped open. She was lying on the living room couch, covered with blankets. All she could see were concerned faces all around her. "How embarrassing!" she struggled to get up, but strong hands forced her back down. "I'm fine, really. Please, let me get up!" She struggled again, to no avail.

"Eli! Look at me!" Papa's concerned face came into focus. "Lie still for a moment." She felt his cold stethoscope on her chest.

"Take a deep breath!" She sucked in a lungful of air and held it. Finally, Papa smiled at her, took her hand and sat her up on the couch. "You can let it out now, Eli." She exhaled with a loud whoosh.

Elaine wrapped a blanket around Eli's legs, and carefully but deliberately folded a second one, unfolded it, and then folded it again...and again. Her hands were shaking. Finally, exasperated, she dropped it in a heap on the floor and knelt down in front of Eli. "I'm so sorry, Butterfly. I should have remembered. If anyone should have known, I should have. You aren't a vampire any more. Gudmund warned me, but I didn't think. Your wounds don't heal as fast as they did before; especially the wounds to your soul. We'll never ask you to go through this again, I promise!"

"Oh Mama! It's not your fault! I wanted to do it. I probably would have done it even if you had told me not to. It was too important!"

"It wasn't that important, Eli." Nils said softly. "We believed you. We believed everything. And now? If we ever doubted your love for our daughter, and the sacrifices you are willing to make

for her, we have no doubt now. Once again, I have to apologize for what my family has forced you to do to prove yourself. It was too much, and it's our fault."

Eli smiled at him. "Then you don't hate me? For what I am...for what I was?"

Livia smiled at her. "All I see is a wonderful, kind, loving child. How could we possibly hate you?"

After a few more minutes, Papa allowed her to get up. The adults gathered around the dining room table, talking quietly together, while Oskar, Eli and Hannah, at Papa's insistence, sat on the lounge chairs by the pool so Eli could rest a bit more.

Oskar, sensing an opportunity, had lingered behind just long enough to ask Livia again if Hannah could spend the night. His initiative was rewarded, and it was finally agreed that she could spend the entire weekend. He rushed out to tell Eli.

"Oskar, you're the best! Why didn't I think of that?"

"You had other things on your mind, Eli." He said softly. He pulled her blanket up over her.

"I've misjudged you again, Oskar. You're even smarter than I thought!" Hannah exclaimed. She gave him a big hug.

He smiled, then sat down on the edge of Eli's lounge and held her hand tightly.

§

Hannah's parents finally left about 10. Eli had only heard bits and pieces of the conversation, but enough to know that they were now fully aware of the hornets' nest Hannah had accidentally kicked in the Tower Hamlets Cemetery. And they were quick to understand Papa's and Mama's motives for having misled them about it.

"Are you sure you're okay, Eli?" Hannah whispered. She slipped in beside her and pulled the blanket up over them.

"I'm fine, Hannah, really."

Oskar rubbed her back. "You really scared me, you know. I thought you were going to die."

"I'm so sorry, Oskar. I didn't know what was happening either." She moved her pillow closer to his, slipped her arm behind his head and turned over on her back. "Hannah? Do you really think your mom and dad still like me?"

"More than ever!"

"I'm so glad they let you stay over for the weekend. I've missed you so much!"

“And I’ve missed you too, Hannah.” Oskar said, sheepishly.

“Oskar, you know you’re my best friend in the world besides Eli, don’t you?”

“Really? Sometimes I’m not so sure.” He smiled at her. “But you have to promise me you won’t do anything stupid again, like going to the vault in the middle of the night by yourself.”

“Stupid?!” That wasn’t stupid! I was trying to get my mom and dad to let me see you two again. Why’s that stupid?”

“Because you almost got yourself killed, that’s why! You should have talked to us first!”

“You didn’t know they were there either! I certainly wouldn’t have gone if I’d known! I’m not that stupid!”

“Stupid is as stupid does...” Oskar didn’t get a chance to finish. Hannah was on him in an instant, pinning his arms over his head. Eli quickly rolled away as soon as she saw her coming.

“You’ve been here before; you know the drill. Apologize! Or better yet, say ‘Uncle!’”

Oskar stared up at her, expressionless. “And if I don’t?”

“Then...this!” she ducked her head down, pushed it up under his pajama top, pressed her lips tightly on his stomach and blew hard. “Brppppp”

Oskar’s body jerked up involuntarily. “Hannah! You can’t...”

“Brrrrpppppp.” She let him have it again.

He started laughing, “Hannah, stop it or I’ll...”

“BBBBRRRRRRPPPP”

That did it. He pulled his pajama top tightly around her head, slung his right leg over her back, leveraged himself up, and rolled over on top of her. As she popped her head out, he quickly straddled her and grabbed for her neck. “You asked for it!” he began tickling her mercilessly.

She grunted, stifled a scream, scrunched up her neck as best she could, and jammed her thumbs up under his ribs. “Take that!” she growled, stifling another scream as he found a particularly sensitive spot.

“Umph!” he twisted and turned, trying to shake her loose, all the while tickling her fiercely. But her thumbs were right on target no matter how hard he tried to squirm away.

Eli sat on the floor, cross-legged, laughing hysterically.

Oskar suddenly ducked his head under her pajama top, took a deep breath, and pressed his mouth against her stomach.

“Noooo! Oskar! Don’t....”

“BRAAAAAPPP” Hannah jerked violently and her arms flailed wildly about as she desperately tried to wriggle away from him. She gasped as she heard him suck in another deep breath.

“OSKAAAARR!!” she screamed, then dissolved in laughter.

“Shhhhh! I hear someone coming!!” Eli hissed. She jumped up and moved quickly toward the bed.

Hannah and Oskar untangled themselves and slid up against the wall. Eli quickly pulled the blanket up over them all.

There was a light knock on the door, and Elaine poked her head in. “Does anyone need any help here? I heard a bit of screaming. And it’s quite likely the neighbors did too.” She nodded towards the open window.

“We’re sorry, Mama! We’ll be quiet. I promise.” Eli giggled.

“See that you do, Eli.” She hid a smile as she softly closed the door. *Thank God for Hannah!* she thought to herself, relieved that the day seemed to be ending on a positive note for Eli after all.

Oskar and Hannah were still breathing heavily. “It’s a good thing your mom came, Oskar. I was about to win and I don’t think your ego could have handled another loss.”

“Oskaaaarr!” he whispered, mimicking her voice perfectly. She giggled and buried her face in his chest. *Oh Oskar! I’ve missed you so much!*

§

Chapter 5: The Changing

The day had finally come. Everyone had gotten up early, and, except for Eli, had a big breakfast at the kitchen table. Even though she knew she wasn't supposed to eat, she was too nervous to even think about it, she realized.

They arrived at the Archaeogenetics complex at 8:00AM and checked in with Jonathan. The Sandstrøms were already in the small waiting room. Eli sat down next to Hannah, while Papa talked quietly with Jonathan and Elaine.

"Are you scared, Eli? I am! I didn't sleep all night! Jason and Einstein stayed up with me too." She yawned.

"Well, I guess I get to sleep through it all, Hannah. But I am worried. What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong, Eli." Jonathan interjected. "The worst that could happen would be tissue rejection or infection, and the chances of either are quite slim. You're a healthy young girl, and the tissue match is perfect."

Healthy young girl. But not quite yet, she thought to herself. She had worried a lot lately about how the operation would change things; not so much with Oskar, who had, in spite of himself and his assurances, always thought of her as a girl, but now, she would be growing up. Would all the things she liked to do change? Would she start liking 'girly' things, like Hannah sometimes did? And stop liking puzzles? She shuddered at the thought. *I'll kill myself first,* she thought to herself. "Oskar, if I start playing with dolls, or feel the urge to shop for frilly dresses, or start spending hours on my hair, promise you'll shoot me?"

"Sure! I promise! But it'll never happen...Elias. I'll just call you Elias any time I feel you slipping away into girly land."

"Wait a minute! I'm a girl. What's wrong with being girly?" Hannah gave him the Look.

"You're not girly at all Hannah! I mean..." he had walked right into her trap. He thought fast. "You're like Eli. You're yourself first and a girl second. I know you like some girly things, like your fairy pajamas and your other fairy...things," he paused. Hannah now had a frown on her face. "But you like your things because you've thought it out ahead of time, not because your frilly little girl friends think they look 'lovely' on you, or anything stupid like that." She was really listening to him now, but still hadn't lost the frown. "Hannah, that's why you and Eli are kindred spirits. You both like what you like and do what you do because you're who you are. You don't let anyone else tell you what to think. That's why I like you so much. I always know what you're thinking, because you tell me...or you beat me up if I guess wrong."

He realized he had nailed it. That was exactly why he liked her so much. She never compromised her feelings, at least not the ones she considered important. Like friendship. And sacrifice. And love.

He took a breath, then without waiting for her response, leaned over and kissed her cheek. She smiled at him.

Goal! He took a deep breath; then let it out slowly. For some reason, what Hannah thought of him was suddenly important to him. He realized how much he needed her right now. He was so frightened for Eli, he couldn't think straight.

"Boy, you're good!" Jason whispered.

"It's time." Jonathan pointed to the wall clock. Oskar put his arms around Eli and hugged her tightly. "I'll be as close to you as they'll let me. And I promise, I'll be there when you wake up."

"I love you Oskar. Elias loves you too," she whispered. Oskar stood back as Papa and Jonathan led her through the swinging doors and down the long hallway. He watched through the round window until they disappeared through the final set of doors at the end of the hall. He sat down on the hard leather couch, put his head in his hands, and closed his eyes. He felt Hannah as she sat down quietly beside him and put her arm around him.

§

"Eli? I'm here." With that simple acknowledgment, Eli opened her eyes. Papa, Mama, and Oskar were by her side.

"Am I..."

"The implant was a complete success." Papa said. "If everything else goes as well, you'll be home in a few days."

"How do you feel, Butterfly? Are you comfortable? Are you in any pain?"

"I'm fine, Mama. It hurts a bit, and I feel a little bloated, but I'm okay."

"Do you have any questions, Eli?" Jonathan adjusted the IV.

"Is...is my scar still there?" For some reason, that was suddenly even more important to her than the surgery's success.

He smiled at her. "No, Eli. It's completely gone now. I saw to it myself. And in a few short months, once the implant has grown to its full age-appropriate size, no one will ever be able to tell that you had an implant at all."

"Do you mean it's not my size?" she asked anxiously.

He laughed, "It's not like shoes or a pair of pants, Eli. It's smaller than normal because we grew it ourselves over a relatively short period of time, under less than perfect conditions; 'perfect

conditions' being defined as being grown from birth inside a healthy, prepubescent girl's body. Now that it's where it belongs, it will grow rapidly and your body will automatically make room for it." He paused a moment. "Now remember, no swimming for at least a month; only showers, no baths; no strenuous exercise; and no running or other high-impact activities. In fact, no long walks for at least a week. The bandages come off and the stitches come out at the end of the week. You don't have to remember any of this though; your father has been given a copy of the owner's manual." He grinned at her.

Oskar looked startled, "Really? There's an owner's manual?"

"No, Oskar!" Eli blushed. "He's just kidding."

"And, if everything goes as planned, I have a surprise for you. I'll be able to give you back your eyes in just about a month. It's just an injection, but we want to make sure your system has settled down a bit before subjecting you to any more changes."

"Really?! My eyes?"

"Yes, Eli." Elaine smiled at her. "But he's going to try it out on me first, next week. We kept it from you until after your implant. One thing at a time, you know."

"Oh Mama! Does that mean you can paint again?"

"Of course, Butterfly. But I could still paint without them. Just not from such great depths -- or heights."

"That reminds me. I have a couple things to talk to you two about, Richard. Will you kids be okay without us for a few minutes?" Jonathan asked.

"Sure!" Oskar waited until they were outside. "How do you feel now that you're really a girl?" *Really a girl. Eli is really a girl.* Oskar felt a bit odd even bringing it up. In fact, he realized that he was uncomfortable with it for some reason. How could that be? Hadn't that been what he had wanted all along? He thought it was, but why was he feeling apprehensive about it now?

"I feel the same, Oskar. Exactly the same. No dolls or perfume. Where's Hannah? Why isn't she here?"

"Any minute, Eli. I think I hear them coming now." Hannah burst into the room and rushed over to Eli. "How are you feeling? Does it hurt? Are you going home soon? When can you come over and spend the night?"

Oskar took a deep breath and backed away as Nils, Livia, Jason, and Hannah bombarded her with questions. He stepped out in the hallway, still unable to shake his deep sense of unease.

"Oskar!" Jonathan cornered him in the hallway. "Would you like to see the robot?"

His unease vanished instantly. “Really? Can I?”

“You mean, ‘May I,’ don’t you?” he grinned at him. “Of course! Come with me.”

Oskar eagerly followed him down the hall through the final set of swinging doors, and finally, into the operating room. White-coated men and women were just finishing up, moving complicated-looking pieces of equipment back against the wall and locking the long, slender mechanical arm in its cradle.

“That’s okay, Phil. I’ll finish up in here. Oskar? You sit over there, next to the operating table. And hold this pen for me.” He handed Oskar a small, thin rod about 3 millimeters in diameter, then sat down at the console, flipped a couple of switches and put his hands and upper arms into the huge gloves suspended just below the huge TV screen. Oskar could see his own face in it, peering back at him from the other side of the operating table. It got bigger and bigger as the arm swung gently away from the wall and approached him slowly. Two tiny claws attached to two thin thirty-centimeter long jointed arms at the end of the bigger one opened and closed as it approached.

“Oskar? Hand me the pen.” Oskar stood up and started around the end of the operating table. “No, no. Put it in my...other hand.” Oskar looked at the tiny claw as it opened slowly. He suddenly realized it wasn’t a claw at all; it was a five-fingered, jointed hand, but very small, each finger no more than two centimeters in total length. *Like The Terminator’s hands, only smaller*, he thought to himself. He carefully held out the pen, then caught his breath as the tiny hand, in one smooth very human-like motion took it from him, and moved purposefully down to a white tablet lying in the center of the operating table, held firmly in position by two polished metal rods seated firmly in brackets on either side of the table. In the very center of the tablet was a tiny white dot, 5 millimeters in diameter. Oskar glanced up at the console as the dot grew until it filled the screen. Then, in one smooth motion, the pen moved down and wrote, in beautiful script, ‘Oskar Dawson,’ then, directly under it, ‘Eli Dawson.’

Oskar watched the spot suddenly grow impossibly small on the screen as the arm swung back, moved across the room, gently placed the pen in its own small niche in the wall, and paused above the cradle. Jonathan slipped his hands out of the gloves and locked the arm back in place.

“What do you think, Oskar?” he unclamped the tablet and handed it to him. “You can keep this as a souvenir, but you’ll need a magnifying glass to read it. You do have one don’t you?” he grinned at him.

Oskar was almost speechless. “That was...amazing!! And you operated on Eli with that?”

“Only for the final part of the procedure, Oskar. We used it to attach all the tiny blood vessels and nerve endings. And to make sure that everything was functioning properly before we finally closed her up. Of course, we replace the hands with specialized tools for the actual surgery. The hands are for more general work, as well as calibration; and to hone our skills, as you can see.” He sat down next to Oskar and put his arm around him. “Father had a lot of money he had accumulated over the years, and invested it wisely and carefully; and, most recently, with this

final event in mind. All for Eli. All to make amends for what his father had done to Elias and all the others.” He paused. “And also for you, you know. He had grown quite fond of you by the end.”

He stood up abruptly, “We’d better get back before Eli misses you. I just thought you’d like to visit the scene of the crime.” They walked down the hall together.

For the first time, Oskar thought seriously about what he wanted to do when he grew up. And this was it. He really wanted to be a part of all this. He was just itching to get his hands on one of those robotic arms. *How exciting it must all be!*

§

Den Tredje stared at the photo, fixedly. It was ‘Rich,’ undoubtedly. But it was also impossible. The man he saw in the tomb looked exactly like this photo, but the photo was over 15 years old. Too many things just didn’t add up. *Doctor Richard Dawson, Molecular Biology Department.* His address and phone number were listed in the faculty directory he had photocopied. A few more trips to the library alone, had confirmed that his wife and child had died in an automobile accident in 1979. The article about the sun-sensitive girl, Eli, had come out in 1983. Clearly, he had adopted the children sometime during that period. Yet Eli hadn’t aged either. *Well, I’ll get some of my answers soon, one way or another.*

§

“I’m sorry, Dad. I forgot all about it until now. We were all really scared and I forgot!” Hannah was frightened by her dad’s reaction.

“Hannah, didn’t you realize my name was on the lamp? And yours was on the flashlight! They’ll find us, if they haven’t already!” Livia was already on the phone, talking to Richard.

“No, Dad. It wasn’t!” Jason said. “The tag on your old lantern just said, ‘Nils S. Manchester.’ And Hannah’s flashlight only had ‘Hannah S.’ Remember? She wrote so big, she ran out of room.” He flashed her a grin. “I think it was that extra ‘h’ at the end that did it.

“You’re right, Jason! I remember now. I bought the lamp just before your mother and I married, when I still lived in Manchester during college. Thank God! But we’re still not out of danger. Good detective work could easily find us still. But it might buy us some time. Livia? Let me talk to Richard!” He got up quickly and went into the kitchen.

“Thanks, Jason. I wouldn’t have remembered that,” Hannah said, relieved.

“Anything for my favorite little sister...”

She smacked him on the arm. “That’s for making fun of my name. You didn’t think I’d forget did you?”

“Nope! You’re like an elephant. You never forget.” He hugged her tightly. But he was really scared. All these stories had been exciting, but now...They were too close to home now. This was real.

Livia stepped in, saw the look on Jason’s face and tried to reassure him. “Dr. Dawson says we shouldn’t worry at this point. The bottom line is, they wouldn’t be able to enter the house uninvited. And since your father only lived in Manchester while he was in college and stayed in student housing, it would be almost impossible to find him with only an S as the initial of his last name. He had no other ties there. So stop worrying.” She put her arms around them both. “Now scoot on up and go to bed. There’s school tomorrow and it’s late.”

§

Jason tossed and turned. He knew his mother was right, but it didn’t help. He rolled over and stared out the window. It was pitch black outside. He felt a cold chill as he realized that there could be four pairs of eyes out there right now, watching him as he slept. Or Hannah. He got quietly out of bed, slipped up beside his window, and closed the blinds.

He turned quickly as he heard a soft, rustling sound behind him. The faint light from the stairway silhouetted a dark form standing in the hallway just outside his door. His heart stopped as he watched it move slowly and purposefully towards him.

“Jason!” Hannah whispered. “I’m scared! Can...can I sleep with you tonight?”

Without saying a word, Jason climbed into bed and held the blanket up for her. She gratefully slipped in next to him. “Thanks, Jason. I’m sorry I’m such a baby. I even closed all my blinds.” He heard Einstein’s soft breathing coming from the end of the bed, and realized he had followed Hannah into his room. Even though he knew there would be nothing he could do to protect her if something happened, he was extremely thankful she was there beside him. For some reason, it made him feel safer somehow. But of course he could never tell her that; after all, he had his big brother reputation to uphold. And he knew deep down that it would really scare her if she knew how frightened he was.

“It’s okay, Hannah. You know Einstein would protect you. He’s pretty big, you know. He’d never let anyone hurt you. We’re safe here.” She snuggled up against him. He lay there quietly until Hannah’s slow, steady breathing told him she was sound asleep. He finally fell into a fitful sleep himself around 2:00AM.

§

Oskar and Jason sat by the pool waiting for the girls. Dad was firing up the grill with Nils, and Elaine was just scooping the last of the leaves out of the pool. “What a beautiful day!” Livia exclaimed. Perfect for Eli’s ‘first swim’ party.”

Elaine smiled, “Eli’s been excited all day. She wants desperately to get back to her normal life, whatever that means in her case.”

Livia laughed. “You’re right. Nothing’s been ‘normal’ in our household either, since Eli came into our lives. She’s certainly contagious. Even Jason has changed, and for the better, I might add. He’s become fiercely protective of Hannah, even though some of his friends have been giving him a hard time about it. He’s becoming immune to peer pressure much earlier than I had hoped possible. And I attribute it all to Eli. She has a way of forcing us all to focus on the important things in our lives. I know it isn’t deliberate, but it just seems ... natural.”

Elaine took one last careful look into the pool. With her new eyes, she spotted a few twigs caught in the drain cover at the bottom, and noticed a spot of rust just beginning to form on the edge of the drain. She made a mental note to warn Rich about it later. “It does seem that way, doesn’t it? And it may be my imagination, but I already see signs of a new maturity in them both; a possible indication that they’re really getting older, physically and mentally.”

“I’ve noticed it too, but I suspect it’s more because they have each other’s support and encouragement, and, with Jason and Hannah, new perspective. They’re all good for each other; a more focused, positive kind of ‘peer pressure.’”

Oskar looked up as Eli and Hannah stepped out the porch door. Uncharacteristically, Eli’s hair was tied back in a neat bun. *Hannah, of course. She just couldn’t resist.* But the effect was startling. She was really pretty, but in a different way; a way that made him uncomfortable. And with her new bathing suit she had become almost...He couldn’t put his finger on it. He forced a smile as she ran over to him, beaming.

“Oskar! What do you think? Do you like it?” she gracefully spun around for him.

“You look ...really nice, Eli.” He forgot his discomfort immediately. She was so happy; and he really liked it when she was happy. He gave her a hug, immediately recognized the smell of Hannah’s lavender shampoo, and smiled to himself. He resisted the urge to call her ‘Elias,’ knowing instinctively that he would destroy the moment by doing so.

“What about me, Oskar?” Hannah stood there, hands on her hips, glaring at him.

He blushed, “Sorry, Hannah. You look great too! I really like your hair. But aren’t you both afraid to get those magnificent hairdos wet?” he turned to Jason. “I guess you and I are on our own.” He turned and dove gracefully into the pool, followed immediately by Jason.

He smiled to himself as Eli took the bait and hit the water just after him. In spite of his efforts, she passed him quickly and had almost caught up with Jason by the time he reached the other end of the pool.

Jason scrambled up next to the diving board, reached down, took Eli’s hand and helped her out of the water. “Wow! For a shrimp, you’re pretty fast. Wanna try that again now that I know you’re serious competition?”

“Sure! Go for it!” she turned, paused an instant, then dove into the pool. They hit the water simultaneously.

Oskar felt relief as he watched them go. Eli’s hair was now mostly undone, other than the scrunchie still barely maintaining a disheveled ponytail. He decided he could live with that. “Go, Eli!” he shouted, as Jason pulled ahead slightly. He could see Hannah, still dry as a bone, shouting encouragement to Eli at the other end of the pool. For some reason, Hannah looking pretty didn’t bother him at all.

He swam slowly toward the other end of the pool as Jason held both arms up in victory. “Gotcha!” he shouted. “But I really had to work at it, Eli. Hannah tells me you might go to school with us. If you do, I’ll set you up with the swim team coach. You’re a natural!”

Oskar pulled himself out of the pool and sat next to Hannah. “You’re really good at that girly stuff, Hannah. She really looked pretty.”

“She did, didn’t she! Did you like it? Eli didn’t think you would. Why would she think that?”

“I...I’m not sure.” Oskar couldn’t look at her.

Eli plopped down beside him, “Did you hear that Oskar? Jason’s going to tell the swim coach about me. Won’t that be fun?”

“You should do it, Eli. You’re so good!”

“Not until I can beat Jason, I’m not.” She said, grinning.

My Eli, he thought to himself, relieved again.

“Come and get it,” Papa shouted. They all piled out of the pool, grabbed plates, and gathered around the table. Eli still hadn’t taken eating for granted yet, so she was enjoying this all the more. She especially liked the idea that she could be so completely normal again, and now, with her implant, her nightmare was finally completely over. She was really whole again. She found herself wishing that Gudmund were still alive to see it all, but on reflection, realized he probably had.

“What are you grinning at?” Oskar asked.

“Nothing! I’m just feeling good, okay?” she nudged him playfully.

§

Hannah had insisted on fixing Eli’s hair again after dinner; especially since, as she told Eli, “Oskar told me he liked it!”

“Are you sure?” That hadn’t been the feeling she had gotten from him at night. He was keeping things from her, and she couldn’t figure out what they were – it was just a feeling she had. But Oskar was Oskar; he’d tell her when he worked it out, whatever it was. It was nothing serious, she was sure. It never was. If it were serious, he would have discussed it with her or she would have inadvertently read him when his guard was down.

Finally, as the sunlight was just lifting off the tops of the trees, the Sandstrøm’s noisily gathered up their things and piled into the car. “It’s getting late, and there’s school tomorrow. And I just found out Hannah still has homework,” Liva said, frowning at Hannah.

Oskar and Eli cleaned up outside while Mama and Papa filled the dishwasher.

“Look, Eli, Hannah left her new sweater.” Oskar pointed to the back of a lounge chair.

Eli ran in, grabbed the phone, and called. “Mr. Sandstrøm? Hannah left her new sweater.” She heard him tell Hannah, and heard her begging him to go back.

“Please, Dad! I wanted to wear it tomorrow!”

Nils sighed, and gave in. “Thanks, Eli. We’ve not gotten far. We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll have it ready for her.” She quickly headed back outside and grabbed the sweater and a handful of towels.

They had just finished up when the doorbell rang. Oskar and Papa were in a deep discussion about the future of Robotics, and the proper subjects he would have to master in college to be proficient in such things. Oskar, overwhelmed by it all, was beginning to have second thoughts. “I’ll get it, Papa!” She jumped up, grabbed the sweater and jerked open the front door.

“Well, hello there...Eli is it? Yes, I’m sure of it! I’m so glad to finally meet you, under decidedly more pleasant circumstances than last time. At least, more pleasant for me. And at YOUR home this time; and such a nice one it is! May I come in?” *Den Tredje* stood quietly on their front porch smiling. Eli dropped the sweater and backed quickly away. “Papa! They’re here! Mama!

Den Tredje bent down slowly, picked up the sweater, pressed his face into it and took a deep breath. “Ahh! And Hannah has recovered from her recent...entanglement I hope? I do regret that she got away from me, however. She smelled so nice and ... fresh. But I’m a patient man. All things come to he who waits.” Eli felt a wave of nausea wash over her as his foul odor wafted into the entryway, dredging up dark memories even she had forgotten.

§

Eli finally accepts Gudmund’s gift, Oskar has second thoughts, and one of The Four makes a discovery.

Link, when approved: <http://let-the-right-one-in.com/fancontent/ff/chapter-5-the-changing>

Chapter 6: The Siege

“How many, Oskar?” Dawson pulled him back into the kitchen.

“One, Dad. Only the one called ‘*Den Tredje*.’ I’m sorry! I didn’t...”

Dawson put his finger to his lips. “Oskar, go upstairs quickly, call Nils, then close your door and your drapes. Tell him to stop wherever he is and wait for us to call him back. Let’s hope it’s not too late! Tell him what’s happened. And get as much information out of this ... Thing as you can.” He turned and headed for the door.

§

Oskar closed his door quietly and hit the redial button.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Sandstrøm! A vampire is at the house! Dad says to stop where you are, and he’ll call you back when it’s safe.”

“But Oskar, we’re here! I’m just rounding the corner...”

“Keep driving! Just drive by! Please! Don’t stop. He’ll see Hannah and he’ll get you all!” Oskar was shaking now. He rushed into the bathroom and looked out the window. He saw their car slowly turn the corner and approach the house. All he could do now was pray that *Den Tredje* wouldn’t notice. Without hesitation, he poured himself into the darkness of *Den Tredje*’s mind.

§

“Hannah! Get down on the floor, quickly,” Nils hissed. Unhesitatingly, she dropped like a rock.

“Everyone look straight ahead.” He whispered. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see them in the porchlight; a tall thin man, and Eli in the open doorway with Richard’s hands on her shoulders. As they passed by, he saw Elaine approaching the door. The man turned his head briefly in their direction, then quickly back again. Nils, breathing a sigh of relief, gently picked up speed and watched in the rear view mirror until the house was out of sight. He turned right just before the creek and headed back towards their own house.

“Dad, we can’t leave them! We’ve got to help them!” Hannah was frantic.

“Richard told us to stop and wait until he called back, and we’re going to do just that. He and Elaine know exactly what they’re doing. We have to trust them. It wouldn’t do anyone any good for us to go back now.” He drove on for another 5 minutes, then pulled over next to a small park and turned off his lights. Hannah leaned over the seat and put her arms around him. “I’m so frightened for them, Dad. What are we going to do now? I couldn’t bear it if something happened to them.”

He looked quickly at Livia and smiled weakly. Their lives were about to change forever, he realized. There would be nowhere they could turn for help; no one would ever believe what they were up against. They would have to handle this entirely by themselves. He turned around and hugged Hannah fiercely; then looked over at Jason. His son; his precious son, who had grown up so quickly and who had taken on the job, unsolicited, of watching over his sister. He could see the trust in his eyes -- in all their eyes. He realized suddenly how much they all depended on him. He only hoped he could live up to their expectations.

§

Richard walked up to the open door and quickly pulled Eli back toward him.

“Doctor Dawson! I’m glad to finally meet you formally. I’ve read a great deal about you since our first meeting.”

Richard gasped involuntarily as he saw the Sandstrøm’s car turn the corner.

Den Tredje turned his head as he saw the headlights reflect off the windows, but his attention turned immediately back to Elaine as she approached the door, golden eyes blazing. Startled, he took a step backwards, but recovered quickly. “Elaine! How very nice to see you again after all these years. And your presence here has answered my first question for me. The mystery of *Den Andra*’s disappearance has been solved. The others will be pleased.” His eyes glowed with rage. The thought of this ... slut having killed the best of them was almost too much for him to bear.

“He was an easy kill. He had grown careless, and combined with his stupidity and lack of imagination, it was no challenge at all, even for me.” Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the Sandstrøm’s car continue on past the house. “It’s hard to believe that he was the best of you all. He died, spiked to the ground in the sunlight, pleading for his life.” *I’ve got to keep his attention focused on me.*

“You lie, of course,” he hissed. “But all that matters now is that I’ve solved the mystery.”

“Yes? And what are you going to do about it? Wait for an invitation? Don’t hold your breath.” She smiled at him. “Dealing with me will be a bit more difficult than dealing with children.”

“I don’t need an invitation. Many things can happen while you’re all sleeping. A gas leak. A mysterious fire. It would be so sad, but accidents do happen.”

“This is getting us nowhere. What do you want? Why are you here?” Dawson stepped up beside Elaine.

“Curiosity, Doctor. Your immortality fascinates me. And the paradox of your little one’s lack of it, in spite of the proof to the contrary. And her twin? A marvelous puzzle! A puzzle I’m determined to solve, before I...” He licked his lips suggestively. His foul breath reminded Dawson of a rotting corpse.

Elaine thought fast. *We need to ask him questions that allow Oskar to see the answers.*

“And where’s the rest of your little coven? Out recruiting? With *Den Andra*’s death, you’re down to ... what is it? Four now? Just enough for a rousing game of Bridge. At this rate, you’ll soon be limited to a game of checkers. What would *Den Första* have thought of you all? But then, he WAS the first of you immortal geniuses to meet an untimely end. And he was the best of you.”

“You’ll see us all soon enough. And I’m looking forward to meeting your daughters at a more...opportune time, especially this one” He smiled at Eli. “I think of you as my...special prize. We have a score to settle. And where’s your brother? Cowering in his room?” Dawson’s grip tightened on Eli’s shoulders as she tried to wriggle free. *Den Tredje* braced himself, poised to grab her if she got just a bit closer. In spite of Elaine, he was sure he could kill her quickly before she could react. Elaine’s presence had spoiled his game. He had to take what he could get.

“You know nothing about us! You’re like him! I wish you were dead and burned to ashes just like he was.” Eli shouted angrily. “I wish Gudmund had killed you all! We just want to be left alone!”

He stared at her intensely, his anger building. “How do you know of such things? No one but someone who was there could know these things. And Elaine is too young to have known. She’s just a child in the scheme of things.”

“But old enough to wonder why you would come alone. Not expecting to find me here, is that it?” Elaine interjected. *It won’t do for him to examine Eli’s past too closely.*

“That’s puzzled me too,” Dawson said. “The four of you could have lain in wait and picked us off one by one as we came outside. Why didn’t you?”

“Enough! My purposes are my own! Consider this a courtesy call; a gentleman’s way to warn you of your impending deaths.”

“Or did you sneak out while the others were still asleep in their holes in the ground? You’d better hurry home before they catch you out of bed.” Elaine chided.

“It’s going to be a great pleasure for me to watch you die.” He hissed. “And watch you I will.” He turned with a flourish and strode purposefully away. “Sleep well tonight...if you can.”

Without slowing, he ripped off his shirt and raised his arms over his head as his wings crackled and grew. He stepped into the street, lifted off effortlessly, circled the house twice, and headed for downtown. Elaine stepped out into the yard and watched him until he was out of sight.

Richard was already on the phone, “Nils! Are you all alright?”

“We’re fine, Richard. How about all of you?” He asked anxiously. “It was all I could do to force myself to drive on and leave you there. But...”

“We’re all fine! You did the right thing, Nils. Don’t doubt it for a second. You would have all been killed if you had stopped. And the deaths would not have been pleasant.”

Nils hesitated, “And I want you to thank Oskar for his quick thinking. I was on the phone with him when we rounded the corner. If he hadn’t yelled for me to keep driving, I’m honestly not sure what I would have done. Probably the same, but the few extra seconds of hesitation might have proved fatal.”

“Ask him what we should do now, Nils.” Richard could hear Livia’s frightened voice in the background.

“Hold on a minute, Nils.” He turned as he spotted Oskar rounding the landing at the bottom of the stairs. “Where are they, Oskar? How far?”

“There’s only *Den Tredje*, Dad. And he’s still heading for the cemetery. I can’t hear any of the others.

“Nils? I think you should come back here immediately. We’ll put our heads together and decide what to do then. Oskar will give us plenty of warning if they decide to come back.”

“We’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Is Eli okay, Dad? Oskar?” Hannah was in his face.

“They’re all fine, Hannah. We’re going back now, so you can ask her yourself.” He swung around and headed back toward their house.

§

“Everything’s changed now,” Richard said as they all settled in around the dining room table. “They know where we live. We’re going to have to set some ground rules. First, Elaine and I feel strongly that you all should move in with us until this is resolved. They won’t keep looking for your home if they think you all live here. That gives us a fallback and, in case something untoward happens, a refuge for your family, Nils. What do you think?”

“I think we should do it, Nils. It makes sense, and Richard and Elaine know so much more about what we’re up against. There’s safety in numbers.” Livia squeezed his hand. Nils nodded at Richard.

“Good! That’s settled then.” Dawson checked it off on his list.

“But Dad! What about my animals? What about Nip and Tuck, and Romulus and Remus? Who’s going to feed them and take care of them? I can’t just leave them. And I’m not coming without Einstein!”

“Oskar thought of that, Hannah,” Dawson said, “He’s offered to take care of them at the lab. When he’s not there, Jack will take care of them. And they won’t be lonely; they’ll have Oskar’s ten immortal mice to keep them company.” Before Hannah could protest, he added, “And Einstein is certainly welcome to stay here. He can sleep in Eli’s room with you. Jason can sleep in Oskar’s room. Livia, you and Nils will have Elaine’s old room. This old house will be able to handle you all with no effort.”

“Oh Oskar, you’re so sweet to think about my animals, I could just kiss you.”

Oskar stole a glance at Nils and Livia, and turned bright red. “I don’t mind really, Hannah.”

“Now, you may feel the children would be safer if we were to send them away somewhere; I know you have relatives in Hastings, Livia, but I really think that we can concentrate on our defenses better if we know they are safely here with us. The only hard and fast rule in that case has to be: Under no circumstances will anyone invite one of them in, no matter whose life is at risk. We just can’t allow even one of them inside, or all is lost. And after the sun goes down, no one is to go outside alone; that’s a hard and fast rule. Even with Oskar on guard.”

“So we’re completely safe in the daytime?” Nils asked.

“No, actually we’re not. They’re still in contact with some shady characters that *Den Andra* associated with, including his late photographer’s partner. Another reason why you need to stay here. These people might be willing to do reconnaissance for them during daylight hours; or possibly even more. Regular trips to and from friends, relatives, or your own home, could be dangerous. We’ll have to be very careful.

“Why do you suppose he came alone tonight? And why did he leave so quickly?”

“Oskar? Did you get anything from him about that?”

“Yeah, Dad. He came alone because he’s trying to prove he’s smarter than the others; he wanted to kill us all by himself and bring the news to them. But he changed his mind when he saw Mom. Because of her eyes and her immortality, he just assumed she was still a vampire. He knew he wouldn’t be able to overcome her safely on his own.”

“As I thought, Rich. I hoped as much when I saw his reaction to me, so I took advantage of his error.”

“Well, that certainly explains your bravado!” Rich laughed. “Well done! Maintaining that illusion will aid us immensely.”

“But if that’s the case, how was he planning on overcoming us by himself; before he thought I was a vampire?”

“He was going to grab whoever answered the door and threaten to hurt whoever it was to get the rest of us to come out. But when he saw it was Eli, and saw her first reaction to him, he couldn’t resist tormenting her. By the time Dad appeared he realized the mistake he had made. And when Mom appeared, he knew his plan was doomed. Even so, he still tried to get Eli angry enough to move close enough for him to...” Oskar shuddered.

“Eli, what would have happened if he had simply stepped inside just for a moment; just long enough to drag you outside?”

“He would have died anyway, Papa. Once you cross the threshold, there’s no relief, unless you are invited in. Leaving does no good. You’ll still die.”

“You mean, when you came into my apartment in Blackeberg, you knew you would die if I didn’t invite you in? Even if you left?” Oskar exclaimed, mouth open.

“But you did invite me in, Oskar. It doesn’t matter.” She smiled at him.

“But...you trusted me that much?!”

She nodded, still smiling. Oskar put his arms around her and laid his head on her shoulder. “I didn’t know...What if I hadn’t...”

“But you did, Oskar. That’s all that matters.”

Nils and Livia looked at each other. There was so much they still didn’t understand about the Dawsons. But Nils was even more convinced now that the fate of his family was inextricably linked to theirs, for better or for worse – or at least to Eli. And it comforted him somehow; partly because he realized the link went back over 250 years; and as Hannah had said repeatedly, it was almost as if things had come full circle. He couldn’t shake the idea that something profound was going on. And these ... creatures, these very same living, breathing monsters, played a part in the horror his distant relatives had to endure so long ago; and would also be a deciding factor in their future.

“Nils, you and your family need to make another decision right away. I have the vaccine in my basement lab. I think I should inoculate you all immediately against the vampire parasite. We simply can’t take any chances.”

“Only Nils and myself, Richard.” I really don’t feel right about giving Jason and Hannah an injection of something unproven. We have no idea of the long-term effects, and they’re so young...”

“Livia, one thing I do understand is the long-term effects of the parasite,” Elaine said. “You really don’t want to leave your children vulnerable to that infection, believe me. And it’s the first thing they’ll try if they get the chance.”

“She’s right, Livia. We need to do this. The consequences if we don’t are unimaginable to me.” Nils looked directly at Eli and smiled sympathetically.

Livia threw up her hands and sighed. “The lesser of two evils, I suppose. Okay, I agree.”

“Okay, then!” Dawson got up and headed down the stairs. “You just stay where you are. I’ll be right back.” Jason and Hannah looked at each other wide-eyed; then grinned.

§

“Now then, have we forgotten anything? Hannah? Your pets have everything they need at the lab? Einstein has his bed and enough toys to entertain himself?”

“Yes, Dad. Oskar and Jack, I mean ‘Mr. Shaw,’ assured me they had everything they needed. And Mr. Shaw said that Oskar needn’t risk coming to the Lab. He could take care of them. He’s really nice! I trust him completely. And they’re in a big cage right next to Oskar’s mice.” Einstein rested his head in Hannah’s lap as she rubbed him behind the ears.

“Jason? Last chance.” He looked at his watch. 4:00PM. They needed to get moving.

“I’m fine, Dad. Oskar said I could use his computer any time I need it. And I brought all my disks and games.”

“I’ve given our excuses at school. If time permits, Dr. Dawson will include you two in his classes for Eli and Oskar. And I expect you to do your homework just as diligently as if you were in school.” Livia said sternly. “You should count yourselves lucky to have an instructor with his credentials.”

Nils took one last look at the house, and pulled slowly away from the curb. He couldn’t help wondering if he would ever see it again.

§

“Mama, I want my eyes back. And my ears. And everything else! I should never have...”

“You know you don’t mean that, Eli. Be patient. We’ll figure this out. We have to. They’re too dangerous. Think about all the people they’ve killed and without remorse. We would have an obligation to stop them even if they hadn’t threatened us. You know that, don’t you?” Elaine took her face in her hands, and looked into her eyes. “We have two weapons they aren’t aware of and they’ll be their downfall. We have Oskar, and we have the cure.”

“Plus, I have a few other tricks up my sleeve, Eli.” Papa said, grinning.

“What, Papa? What?!”

“Until I’m sure the prototype works, I won’t say. The only hint I’ll give you is that its inspiration was Eliglass.” He winked at her. “And we have an appointment with Dr. Törnkvist tomorrow morning for an injection. It’s been over a month, and we can certainly use two sets of those eyes, wielded by two former experts in their use. He’ll come to the house in a flower delivery van. With all the people residing here now, I figured it must be someone’s anniversary or birthday or something.”

“Really Papa? How wonderful, Mama!” Her eyes shone as she thought about all the times they had spent together, talking about those things that only they could see and understand. Now she could have that bond with her once again.

“Mom? I’m her twin. Can I get her eyes too? Then three of us could keep watch.” Hannah grabbed Livia’s arm.

“Hannah, you’re only 13. I won’t let you get a tattoo at 13; why should I let you get vampire eyes? If you still want them at 18, we’ll talk.” She looked at Nils for support. She could already see Hannah building up a head of steam.

“That’s silly, Mom! Why would I want a tattoo? Eewww! But you would have let me get my ears pierced when I was only 11 if I hadn’t chickened out. It’s the same thing!”

“I’m afraid your mother is right, Hannah. I’m still uneasy about these things, in spite of Jonathan’s assurances. It’s too big a decision for you to make as a 13-year-old child.”

“I’m not a child anymore!” she shouted. She put her hand over her mouth and quickly sat down on the couch. “I’m sorry Dad, I shouldn’t have...”

It’s okay, Hannah; I know things are really tense right now, and you only wanted to help. It’s okay, really.” He squeezed her shoulder.

“Oskar? Where do they sleep? Did you get that?” Elaine wanted to get everything she could from Oskar, down to the tiniest detail, before anything slipped away.

“They moved the...bodies out of the tomb and two of them sleep there. *Den Tredje* sleeps in a special place in the second tunnel, along with one other. There are actually places in the tunnel for eight. Two are always awake during the day while the other two sleep, since Hannah...”

“Why are two in the tomb, Oskar? The element of surprise if we happen to visit again?”

“Yeah, Dad. That’s it. He thought he was being really clever.”

“He WAS clever, Oskar. But he didn’t know we had you, our secret weapon.

Oskar thought a moment, then grinned. “And Dad? They have cell phones in the coffins with them, so they can be awakened if necessary.” He paused, “I wonder what their ring-tones are.”

“Eli and Hannah giggled. ‘Maybe ‘Purple People Eater,’ ... or ‘Night Prowler,’” Hannah suggested, shuddering dramatically.

Eli grinned. “Or ‘The Blob.’ Or maybe, ‘Night on Bald Mountain.’”

“Or the ‘Song of the Count’ from Sesame Street,” Papa volunteered. That did it. Everyone dissolved in laughter.

Nils looked at Oskar sternly, “See what you’ve started? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! I never could abide graveyard humor.” He winked at him.

§

Five days had passed without incident. After a few bumps in the road related to bathroom scheduling, kitchen duty, and laundry, things had settled into the bare beginnings of a routine. Nils and Richard did the food shopping, much to Livia’s dismay. Jason and Oskar had easily adapted to each other’s presence, aided by the fact that Oskar slept in the daytime while everyone else was up and about. Oskar was always accompanied during his night vigils by Elaine. Richard decided that the combination of his abilities, plus vampire vision, gave them an extra layer of protection.

During the day, everyone was allowed to use the pool and the back yard, except Elaine, because they decided to maintain the illusion that she was still a vampire, just in case the Four had recruited spies. Eli, Hannah, and Jason were keeping a log of license plates as unfamiliar vehicles entered and left the neighborhood. They had already identified a dark blue delivery van with “McDermott Photography” in big letters on the side panel, which had been spotted parked in two different locations down the block on two separate days. Elaine had recognized the name immediately, which is why they had stepped up their vigil. Elaine’s car was always kept in the garage, and was the only vehicle used when they went anywhere, so a casual observer wouldn’t be able to tell whether or not anyone was out.

“Papa, we can’t keep this up forever. What are we going to do?”

“Be patient, Eli. Jack, Henry and I are working on a couple of ideas, based on things you and Elaine have already told us. We’re going to use their strengths against them. Do you remember telling us the story about how you broke Oskar’s earphones? Because the music was too loud? Do you remember how that felt?”

She remembered vividly. “It hurt, Papa. It hurt a lot. But mainly it startled me.”

“Exactly, Eli. Jack has acquired some theatre amps and some of those awful speakers they use in those concerts. We’re setting them up at strategic places near the front and back doors. Plus we have plenty of those aerosol air horns that people use at sporting events.”

He took her into the garage. “Henry brought these over this morning. Tell me what you think, but be careful. Here. Put these on, just in case.” He handed her her old pair of Eliglasses. “Ready?” she nodded. The garage was suddenly filled with an intense blood-red glow that stung her eyes in spite of the glasses. She reflexively closed her eyes and put her hands to her face. When she cautiously lifted the corner of a lens, the unrelenting power of it was almost unbearable.

“That’s awful, papa! It actually even hurts. Does it hurt your eyes too?”

“If I look directly at it, it does, but I was concerned that, with your eyes, it might hurt all the more.”

Do you think it will blind them?”

“We don’t really know, Eli. We can only hope. I only exposed you to the 500 watt version. This other fully-functional one puts out 10,000 watts of focused light. The emitted spectra, although containing a lot of unavoidable extraneous frequencies, which of course, are all you can see through the glasses, is the closest I could get to those exact frequencies I filter out in your Eliglass. We think it will blind them at least temporarily, and possibly even burn them. What do you think?”

“It’s brilliant, Papa!” she grinned at him.

“I just hope it’s ‘brilliant’ enough, Eli.”

§

“I think it’s Sirrus, Oskar. He just seems too ... eager to nail his brother.” Jason insisted.

“Nope! It’s Achenar! He just seems...cruel to me. And someone that cruel can’t be the good guy.”

“Just remember, Oskar. You have to break a few eggs to make a good omelet.”

“What the heck does that mean?! The end justifies the means? I don’t think so. Achenar is not a nice guy.” Oskar took over the keyboard, switched characters, and moved his ‘Stranger’ carefully along the series of wooden planks, barely suspended over the swamp. *What a maze! It almost looks like I can’t get there from here.*

Elaine poked her head in the door. “What are you two arguing about? I’m sure it has something to do with ‘Myst’ doesn’t it?” she said disapprovingly. “Oskar, you should still be asleep. We’ve got another long night ahead of us and you need to stay alert. Why are you up?”

“I couldn’t sleep, Mom. And I couldn’t let Jason get too far ahead of me. It’s such a great game and it really helps me stay awake at night. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Oskar, you need to take this more seriously. You’ve got a big responsibility here. I know you didn’t ask for it, but you’re the only one with your ability. If I determine that you’re not able to function properly, you’re going to have to agree to stop playing that game; at least when you should be asleep. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, Mom. But I’ll be fine. You’ll see!” he turned back to the computer.

Elaine sighed, “I’ll check back with you later, Oskar. Jason? Isn’t it about time for bed?”

He got up reluctantly. “Okay, Mrs. Dawson. Just a couple more minutes, okay?” He leaned over Oskar’s shoulder. “No, Oskar, you pull **THAT** lever first, then this one. See how the board moves...”

Elaine shook her head, then headed downstairs to the study. She and Rich still had a lot of planning to do before they could venture into the vault. *The sooner the better*, she thought to herself. *I’m sure they’re not sitting around on their butts either. We have to move quickly.*

§

Oskar was stumped. It was 3:00 AM and he still couldn’t figure out how to get into the stilted structure he could see above him. His head was spinning with the effort. He sighed and put his head in his hands for a moment. He looked up as he noticed real movement on the screen for the first time and saw the brothers facing off on the catwalk above him. *Good! Now I’ll see which of them is the kind one; the one I need to save.* He watched as they drew their swords. They hesitated a moment, then, as Achenar turned away for a second when he recognized the soft sound of his mother’s voice, Sirrus swung his sword directly at his head. *Jason was right!* he thought to himself. But then, as Achenar ducked out of the way, Sirrus stumbled over a loose board and fell, dropping his sword off the catwalk into the swamp. Achenar quickly plunged his own sword up to its hilt in Sirrus’s chest, then turned and winked at Oskar. “Need any more help, Oskar?” he asked. But it was too late: Oskar was sound asleep over his keyboard, head balanced precariously in his hands.

§

Hannah woke up with a start. All she could see was Einstein’s face, almost touching her own. He lightly brushed his paw against her face again. “Not now, Einstein. Can’t you wait until morning?” she whispered. He licked her face and wagged his tail fiercely.

She sighed, and slipped quietly out of bed. Einstein paused at the head of the stairs and looked back at her expectantly. Hannah saw the glow of the monitor through Oskar’s partly-open door as she tip-toed past. *I’m glad Oskar has SOMETHING interesting to do while he’s awake alone. Maybe Eli and I will surprise him with cookies tomorrow night, if we can tear him away from that stupid game.* She felt her face flush as she resisted a sudden urge to just go in and give him a big hug. *How embarrassing would that be!* She smiled to herself as she followed Einstein down the stairs. From the second floor landing, she saw the light still on under the study door, but Mom and Dad’s room was dark. She quietly slipped down into the living room and headed for

the back door, where Einstein was patiently waiting for her. She hesitated for a second, then carefully looked into the well-lit yard, making sure nothing or no one was there. She knew she was being over-cautious with Oskar on duty, but they had all become that way since...

She shuddered, then quietly opened the screen door and let Einstein out. He sat on the patio for a moment, then, realizing she wasn't coming out with him, began his usual ritual of examining every bush and tree trunk carefully, looking for exactly the right spot and the right smell. *He just has to pee. Why on earth is he so particular?* Hannah sighed impatiently. Einstein walked the entire perimeter once and was in the middle of his second round when he suddenly stopped short next to the tree line against the back fence. His ears went back, and he growled softly, baring his teeth.

The hair on the back of Hannah's neck stood up. "Einstein!" she whispered loudly. "Come here!" She turned toward the corner of the fence where Einstein appeared to be looking. Nothing. *Was that shadow there before?* She craned her neck and looked more carefully. No movement of any kind. But it looked odd to her; too well-defined to be tree branches, but there was no movement whatsoever. She opened the screen door and stepped out on the patio. "Einstein..."

Suddenly, Einstein growled fiercely and lunged forward. The shadow shifted quickly and the dark figure of a man coalesced, golden eyes blazing in the reflection from the patio floodlights.

Einstein stopped short and began barking loudly. The shadow lunged forward, grabbed him around the neck, and lifted him effortlessly off the ground. Hannah rushed to the edge of the pool. "Put him down! Let go of him! You're hurting him." She realized her mistake immediately, but not before she saw his head snap up and saw those golden eyes fasten themselves on her. She turned to run, but it was too late; he was on her in an instant. She slipped out of his grasp momentarily and grabbed for the door, but he had her arm again instantly. She could hear Einstein coming, his deep-throated growls growing louder as he bounded towards them. He hit them hard, all 130 pounds of him, and sank his teeth firmly into the man's right arm just above the elbow. His grip on her relaxed for an instant, but it was no use; she still couldn't wriggle free. *Den Sjätte* grabbed Einstein by the collar and fiercely hurled him across the yard, where he landed up against the fence, shook it off, jumped up and, still growling, came at him again.

He wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and backed toward the fence, keeping her between himself and Einstein. The screen door opened suddenly and Jason, still in his pajamas, lunged for them as they moved past, knocking them flat on the ground. Einstein grabbed *Den Sjätte* by the ankle and shook it furiously.

"Run, Hannah, run!" Jason shouted, as he leaped up and kicked him hard in the side. A clawed hand reached out, grabbed him firmly by the ankle and threw him to the ground. Hannah scrambled for the still-open door and threw herself inside. Oskar pulled her in even further as Elaine and Richard rushed onto the porch.

"Papa, there's three!" Oskar yelled, as Dawson headed for the door with his bat in his hand.

Elaine and Eli pulled him back as two dark forms moved swiftly across the yard from opposite directions. *Den Sjätte* lifted a struggling Jason over his head and slammed him down hard on the lawn. He groaned once, rolled over slowly, then became still. Einstein stood beside his body, barking furiously.

Without hesitation, *Den Fjärde* kicked Einstein in the side, sending him sprawling across the grass, grabbed Jason's limp body and bounded towards the fence. *Den Femte* grabbed *Den Sjätte* by the arm, and together they followed quickly behind, Einstein in close pursuit.

Nils and Livia reached the porch just in time to see *Den Fjärde* toss Jason's limp body over the fence, and vault after it.

"Oskar! Where are they going?!" Dawson shouted.

Oskar was leaning against the door frame, shaking like a leaf. "It's my fault! It's all my fault."

"Oskar, snap out of it! Where are they going?"

"They're in the back of the van. They're headed for the ... I don't know, Dad. Someone's driving that I can't read. And the others are too excited about Jason; they're not thinking about it." He sat down hard on the floor, his head in his hands.

"Oskar, you need to concentrate. Stay with them as long as you can. We have to know where they're taking him!"

Hannah, sobbing, had her arms around Einstein's neck. Nils and Livia knelt beside her, still in shock.

"Are you sure they're all gone, Oskar? We need to go outside. We need to check..." All Elaine could see in her mind's eye was Jason's body hurling over the fence. Even if he had been conscious, that would have been a hard fall. He could be seriously injured, or...She refused to think about it.

"They're gone! I told you they were gone!" he sobbed.

Dawson ran to the fence and scrambled over it. In the light from the street lamp, he could see the marks Jason's body had made in the damp strip of lawn next to the sidewalk. He gasped as he spotted a blood smear extending across the sidewalk towards the curb. He quickly scrambled back over the fence. "Oskar! Come here! The rest of you, stay where you are!"

Oskar rushed over and buried his face in Dawson's chest. "Dad, he's bleeding. And they're hungry. I can see them looking at him..." Oskar suddenly jerked away, dropped to the ground and threw up violently. He started to get up, then threw up again, and then again. "Dad they're..." He jerked violently as he tried to throw up yet again. But there was simply nothing left.

Chapter 7: Retaliation

Nils' lantern glowed dimly in the center of the table, surrounded by four sets of golden eyes. "Nicely done!" *Den Tredje* stood at the head for the first time. This had been his call, his battle, his strategy, and his victory. The first chair was now his by tradition. "A long time has passed, my friends, between our last victory and this one, as small as it is." He glanced over at the boy's still form, lying in a heap against the arched door, exactly as they had unceremoniously dumped it upon their return. "One down, seven to go. Our next target is Elaine. Without her to defend them, the rest will come to us easily. Remember, time is on our side. They can't survive like this forever. Mistakes will be made and we'll be there to exploit them."

Den Sjätte was inwardly seething. He had understood immediately that *Den Tredje* had kept vital information from them; information that could have brought an end to this whole episode quickly and cleanly if they had worked together. But *Den Tredje* had grandstanded, and no matter how circuitous his explanation for his actions was, *Den Sjätte* knew he had made serious errors in judgment; errors that put their anonymity at risk. Dawson didn't live out in the country. He and his family lived in a relatively dense suburb. Every time they went there, they ran the risk of being seen by the neighbors. Even tonight there must have been questions. The Dawsons had made a lot of noise when the child was taken. That infernal dog had made enough noise to wake the dead. Would they call the police? Even if they weren't believed, the police might believe enough of their story, coming from so prominent a man, to investigate the tomb and the vault. And taking the child was a one-way street. They wouldn't want him back now in any case after what we've done to him; either outcome will be a losing one for the boy. Elaine especially would know that.

"What if they turn to the police for help?" *Den Fjärde* asked, worriedly

"They won't! They think we'll kill the boy if they do. And I'll pay them a visit tomorrow evening to make sure they understand that."

"But, he's already..."

"They don't know that!" *Den Tredje* said sharply. He motioned to *Den Femte*, "Put him in the chamber. We'll decide what to do with him when whatever happens – happens. He could be useful to us yet."

Den Femte slowly rose, unlocked the arched door and looked down at the boy, detached. He looked more closely, and noticed a bit of blood welling up from the wound on the side of his head, as well as the ritual one they had, together, inflicted on him in the back of the van. He glanced up at the others to see if they had noticed, then gingerly picked up the limp body, stepped inside and placed it carefully on the table. He bent over the now pasty-skinned child, and with his eyes half closed in anticipation, placed his mouth delicately over the small wound on his neck, softened the congealed blood around the twin puncture marks with his tongue, and drank. But only just a bit. Not enough to affect the uncertainty of the final Changing, he was sure. He composed himself a moment, then stepped out and locked the door behind him. *In the scheme of things, it really doesn't matter much one way or another*, he thought to himself, smugly.

§

“Oskar, can you still hear them? Where are they now? Where’s Jason?” Oskar realized Dad’s hands were around his waist, steadying him as he finished another bout of the dry heaves. He tried to take a breath, but it was no use. He retched again. Elaine placed a cold washcloth against his forehead, and held his face in her hands. Eli, stony-faced, and emotionless, held his left hand tightly. Her head was full of long-familiar dark thoughts – about things she thought she had forever left behind her after the cure.

“It’s okay, Oskar. Stay still. Try to take steady, deep breaths.” Elaine rubbed his back gently.

Finally, he sat back on the grass. “They’re gone Dad. Mom? They’re back at the vault, I think. At least, that’s what I got at the very last...” he felt like his body weighed a ton. He leaned back against Elaine, exhausted. “Mom, they...” He felt a wave of nausea wash over him, and forced it back. “They... they tore his shirt off and licked all the blood off him, off his face and his head and his chest– and I could hear them purring...” he gagged. “Then they bit him! And they took turns drinking from him! It was almost like a church thing, Dad. *Den Sjätte* pushed the others away, then bit him on the neck. Then the others put their awful mouths on him and...and they all...I don’t even know if he’s alive! I don’t even know!” he sobbed. “It was like they were proud of themselves or something! Proud that they could drink so little and then force themselves to stop. It was a twisted, awful thing. The way he looked to them, the way they were showing off to each other was disgusting!”

“Was he awake, Oskar?”

“No, Dad. He wasn’t.” He could feel the tears welling up. The lump in his throat made it impossible for him to say anything more.

“Thank God for that. We have to get him back. And soon. If he isn’t dead already, he will be soon from loss of blood and God know what other injuries he may have sustained.”

Eli could imagine what Jason would soon be going through, if he were even alive. *It won’t happen! It can’t happen! It’s Hannah’s brother. It would kill her. And poor Oskar. He’ll never get over it.* She felt completely helpless. *If only...Damn! Damn! Damn!* She felt the rage build until something rose up from deep inside her. She felt strange; an odd feeling of ‘otherness’ she’d not felt since before Oskar. The feeling of a predator stalking its prey. Through Oskar’s still lucid memories, she could see them clearly, and instinctively read their weakness and their strengths in a cold, calculating manner that had been unnecessary for her survival for over 15 years. The familiar cold fury rose up in her, and filled her senses. *A part of it is still here*, she realized, with a start. And of course it suddenly made complete sense to her. It had been with her for over 200 years. It had rewired her brain. She would never be rid of it completely, no matter how much she wished otherwise. It had left a great deal of debris behind when it died, and, at least for now, she was savagely in tune with its presence. *Kill them all!* It seemed to whisper to her. “Yes!” she hissed. “Yes!”

“Eli? Are you all right?” Elaine put her arm around her and felt her muscles tense up; felt her resist her touch.

“I’m fine Mom. Really.” She squeezed Oskar’s hand tightly and pressed her forehead up against his. “I’ll fix this Oskar. I promise you. I’ll fix this,” she whispered. His guilt washed over her in waves. “This isn’t your fault, Oskar. Papa had no right to saddle you with so great a responsibility. You’re just a sweet child.”

“Eli...Elias?” Even through his grief and guilt he saw ... not Eli. He saw Elias as he reached for his neck that night on the jungle gym. The old Elias, the vampire Elias.

He looked at Oskar and smiled. “You understand. I’ll do this for you. I promise. I told you I’d help you.” He stood up and walked swiftly towards the house.

“Eli?” Elaine called after her. “Are you sure you’re all right? Oskar, is something wrong?” Eli had called her ‘Mom.’ She hadn’t done that since before the cure.

“No, Mom, she’s a little upset, that’s all. She’ll be fine,” Oskar lied. He watched as Hannah turned and followed Eli inside. He breathed a sigh of relief. He simply couldn’t have faced Hannah right now. He was a miserable failure and had probably cost Jason his life.

§

Eli paced back and forth in her room, thinking furiously. Hannah was worried. Eli hadn’t said a word to her since... “Eli? What’s wrong? Can I...”

Eli looked right through her, and kept pacing.

“Eli? Do you think Jason is...” her voice trembled.

Eli stopped suddenly and put her arms around her. “I’m so sorry Hannah! Please, please don’t blame Oskar. It’s not his fault. He’s just a kid, like you. Papa never should have...”

“It’s not his fault, Eli. I would never blame Oskar. You’ve got to believe me!”

“I do Hannah. I believe you.” She looked at her intently. “Thank you, Hannah.” She whispered. “I love you so much!” she walked over and stared out the round window. “Hannah, I want Oskar to sleep in here tonight. Is that okay?”

“Okay, Eli. Do you want me to sleep in Oskar’s and Jason’s room?”

Eli smiled, “No, Hannah. You can stay if you want. In fact it might be better for Oskar if you do. I think he feels that you hate him now. He certainly hates himself.”

“Why?! This was all my fault! If I hadn’t gone outside, Oscars’ being asleep wouldn’t have mattered.”

“Stop it! It’s THEIR fault, not ours. They could have walked away. They could have gone back where they came from, but they didn’t. This is on them!” Hannah stepped back, startled by her intensity, and sat down on the bed. “I’m sorry, Hannah; it’s just that I feel so helpless. If I were still a...fairy, I’d get him back, I promise you.” She sat down next to her.

Oskar stepped in the door, saw Hannah, and turned to leave, “Oskar? Don’t go. Please?” Hannah pleaded. “It wasn’t your fault. It was mine. I shouldn’t have gone outside.”

“You only went outside because you trusted me to tell you if there were any danger.” She could see the tears in his eyes. “It’s my fault. You shouldn’t have trusted me.”

“No, Oskar. I saw him before I went out. I went out because I was afraid he was going to hurt Einstein. I wasn’t thinking. It’s my fault that Jason is...” her voice shook. Oskar rushed over and took her in his arms, sobbing.

Finally, they sat down on the bed with Eli. For a while, no one said anything at all.

Eli suddenly stood up and clinched her fists. “Oskar? I’m leaving.” She moved purposefully over to the dresser and began dressing herself.

“But...where are you going?”

“I’m going to get Jason.”

“You can’t! They’ll kill you. You’re just a kid. You’re...”

“No! I’m not. I’ve got these,” her golden eyes glowed for a moment, “And I’ve got over 200 years of experience. Maybe I’m weak and wingless, but I can still remember. I’m going.”

“Not without me you’re not!” He hastily began putting on his clothes. “You can’t do what I can. You’ll need my help.” He simply had to make this up to them all. And Jason had been so brave. If it hadn’t been for him, Hannah would have been lying there, unconscious in the back of the van while they...He shuddered.

“I’m going too! It’s my brother!”

“No! You’re staying here! That’s final.” Eli firmly pushed her back down on the bed. *Talk about a fish out of water...*

“I heard that! And you’re wrong about me. And it isn’t the first time you’ve been wrong.” Hannah stood up quickly. “I’m not going to sit here wondering where you are or whether or not you’re still alive. I’ve done that already, and I DIDN’T LIKE IT. I’m not going to lose all three of you. This way, at least, I’ll know it as soon as it happens,” she said coldly. “I’m going!” She brushed past her and jerked open her dresser drawer. “Don’t try and stop me! I’ll tell your dad

before I'll let you go without me!" she stripped off her pajamas and put on her khaki shorts, her long-sleeved black shirt with the missing button on the sleeve, and laced up her boots.

"Okay, but you both have to agree that I, and I alone am going into the vault no matter what happens. Otherwise the deal's off."

They looked at each other for a moment, then nodded. Oskar knew she meant it. "Eli, I..." He tried to put his arms around her, but she stepped quickly away from him.

"I'll be right back, Oskar." she grabbed her empty backpack and headed for the stairs.

§

They barely spoke to each other, once on the bus. Finally when it pulled over to the curb at Burdett Road just as the sun was coming up, Eli looked at Oskar questioningly.

"Den Tredje and Den Fjärde are asleep in the tomb, Eli. Den Sjätte is working at Den Andra's workbench. I guess he's the new marble guy. He's repairing the stairs to the tomb. Den Femte is reading at the conference table, next to the arched door."

"No one is in the tunnel?"

"No, Eli. No one."

"Where's Jason?" She stole a glance at Hannah.

"He's ... he's locked in the room with the arched door, Eli." He paused. "Eli! He's locked in there because they think he's infected. And that's the only door he couldn't break down as a Vampire! He's alive!"

"Oskar, if he wasn't immune, he'd turn into...something whether he's dead OR alive. Remember Håkan? That's why he's in there. Is he actually alive? Can you tell?"

Oskar thought himself inside Den Femte's mind. He knew he could talk to him if he wanted to, but maybe he could do something else. He pictured Jason in his mind, and gently pushed the memory into his consciousness. It worked.

Oskar gagged. "Eli, he was alive an hour ago at least. That bastard put him in there and drank some of his blood while the others weren't watching." He groaned inwardly as he saw the look on Hannah's face. "But he's still alive, Hannah! That's what's important."

He gasped. "Eli, the key is in the door. He left the key in the door."

"Okay then. I want you and Hannah to wait just inside the North entrance, with air horns. And please! Absolutely no talking. Believe me, he'll hear you. The tunnel is like a megaphone. I just hope I can get through it without making any noise."

“How will we know when to use the air horns?” Hannah asked.

“Oskar will know.”

She led them up Hamlets Way, but followed the sidewalk to the left around the cemetery. She stopped at a small gate just visible through the vine-overgrown fence, looked around carefully, then ushered them in quickly. They turned left immediately on the narrow path parallel to the fence, and were quickly hidden from view by the thick foliage that so completely enveloped the fence that they weren't even sure there was one anymore. The ground rose rapidly on the other side of the path, quickly becoming too steep to climb, and finally, almost vertical. *We'd never get away if one of them chased us out here*, Oskar thought to himself. He was extremely happy the sun was out. Eli stopped in front of what appeared to be a solid rock wall roughly four meters high. She reached down, pulled the vines back from the base, and removed a small brick from a niche in the rock. She slipped her fingers into the hole and pulled hard. The face of the wall slid quietly behind the rock façade, revealing an old iron door, a meter high that blended in so well with the rusty color of the stone, it was almost invisible, even in the sunlight. She smiled as she pulled out a huge old-fashioned heavy metal key and inserted it carefully in the lock. “Mom's” she whispered, then put her finger to her lips, turned the key, and gently pulled on the handle. The door opened easily, and silently. A steady stream of foul air from the tunnel enveloped them.

They quietly slipped inside, and Eli gently pulled the door closed behind them. Except for the light coming through the keyhole, it was now pitch black. After slipping a few items in her pockets, she handed Oskar her backpack, kissed him quickly, then turned and vanished into the darkness.

Hannah and Oskar knelt quietly together, until their eyes grew accustomed to the dark. They could now see almost five meters into the tunnel, at which point it widened a bit and the ceiling rose to over three meters. The floor sloped down abruptly, before disappearing into the darkness. They had heard absolutely nothing since Eli disappeared over 15 minutes ago, and nothing had changed in the vault, as far as Oskar could tell.

He sat back against the wall and wrapped his arms around his knees. Hannah hesitated a moment, then sat next to him and pushed herself up against him. Her face shone in the dim light as she turned toward him, and he found himself suddenly lost in her beautiful eyes. *She's so much like Eli!* He felt an odd tightness in the pit of his stomach.

She put her hand on his knee for a moment, then self-consciously placed it in her lap and pulled her knees up against her chest. He felt her shiver, then move even closer to him. He couldn't help himself; he reached down and placed his hand on hers, then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. *Oh Oskar, I'm so afraid! What if he's really hurt bad? What if Eli doesn't come back? I couldn't bear it!* She put her arms around him.

Eli will save him, Hannah. I just know she will! He felt achingly close to her. All he could see were those eyes – Eli's eyes. Even the smell of her hair comforted him somehow. He held her even tighter.

They sat there silently, arms around each other, and waited in the dark, exchanging thoughts; exchanging fears. He loved her dearly, he realized. And he knew he loved her, at least partly, because he loved Eli so. *Please Eli! Please hurry! Please come back!*

Hannah rubbed his back gently.

§

Eli crept along the floor silently, knowing all the while that she was deaf. But the predator in her remembered. It knew how she had to move to be really silent. After 200 years, she no longer needed to rely on her hearing to do this; she knew all the familiar feelings, the slow, fluid movements, the instinctive random hesitations that helped break up the rhythm of her movements; a rhythm that Those Who Could Hear, would detect.

But she could see. She could see as well as they. And she had the element of surprise. She was certain they weren't expecting anyone so soon. After what seemed like hours, she passed a wide area in the tunnel and saw their resting place. Eight rough-hewn Oak coffin-like crates, lined up neatly against the wall. *Thank God they aren't here today. I don't think I could have made it past them.* She was painfully aware of her deafness now. Normally, she could have heard the air sounds, and the rustling of her clothing as she moved, sometimes even the sound of insects scurrying around in the darkness; but now – nothing, no matter how much she strained. She glanced to the right as she saw the small tunnel leading to the other entrance. *Where Elaine watched us that first night*, she thought to herself. The presence of cobwebs indicated it had not been used in some time.

Finally, she could see the velvet curtain ahead of her through the darkness. She moved up to it cautiously, and gently pulled back the right corner, next to the wall. She could see Den Femte sitting at the table, back to her, hunched over a book. She pulled it back further but couldn't see Den Sjötte; however, she could hear the sound of his hammer and chisel as he worked the marble at Den Andra's workbench.

It took her almost ten minutes to move the five yards from the curtain to the arched door. She knew Den Femte only had to turn to his right a bit and he would see her clearly. Only two meters separated them now. If he were really alert, he would probably be able to hear her heartbeat. She could almost hear it herself, she realized. She reached up and ever so carefully turned the key in the lock, removed it, and placed it in her pocket. She could see the top of Den Sjötte's head over the low wall separating the workshop from the rest of the vault.

"Give me a hand here!" He shouted. Den Femte looked up, closed his book, and moved swiftly across the room toward the workbench. "Help me steady this piece of marble."

Eli quickly pushed the door open, stepped inside, and closed it behind her. She stood up and saw Jason lying on his back on that awful table with the hole in it, eyes closed, wearing only his pajama bottoms.

I have to get him out of here. It's really cold in here and he's almost naked. She gingerly touched the wound on his neck, and was surprised to feel a strong pulse. *He's alive! Thank God!* She pressed her ear against his chest. His heartbeat was actually strong and steady.

He jerked suddenly and started to struggle. Eli put her hand firmly over his mouth, swung herself onto the table, and placed her forehead against his. "Shhh! It's Eli. Please, be still."

"Eli!" he whispered. His body went limp. He stared up at her, blank-faced.

Eli sat up and examined him closely. She noticed immediately that his whole left side was one giant bruise. She ran her hand carefully down his left arm, and saw him wince in pain. "Is it broken? Can you move it?"

He lifted it gingerly. "Yes, but it hurts like hell!" He grimaced, then smiled at her. "Sorry. Where's your dad? And everyone else? Did you kill them all?"

"Shhh! No, I'm here alone. Oskar and Hannah are waiting at the entrance. There are two of 'them' in the vault. We have to leave right now. Can you walk?"

"I...I don't know." He groaned as he sat up and swung his legs off the table. She could feel him shivering as she put her arm around him and eased him slowly to his feet. Hesitantly, he took a step, then almost fell as his left foot took the full weight of his body. "It really hurts, Eli. I don't know if I can..."

"You must, Jason! I can't carry you. You have to be able to walk or all is lost!" she was suddenly very frightened. She realized there was no way he could move silently enough, even if he wasn't limping. He didn't know how. And he wasn't strong enough to run if it came to that. *What have I done? I didn't think this through! How was I ever going to get him out of here once I had him?* She sat down on the floor and put her head in her hands.

"Please Eli, don't....," he whispered. He pressed down hard on his left foot, then took a wobbly step. "Look. I can...walk." He hobbled around the table, but she could see the tears of pain in his eyes, "I'll do it. Just tell me what to do."

She stepped over to the door and peered through the bars. Den Femte was already on his way back. She dropped quickly to the floor as he approached, and sighed with relief when she heard the chair creak as he sat down again with his book. *Now what?* Her mind was racing. She knew if they were discovered now, the ending would be much worse for Jason. And it would be her fault. Den Tredje would not be happy to see her either, at least not at first. This whole thing would reflect badly on him, and she knew he already had a special interest in her. She shuddered involuntarily.

"What do we do now, Eli?" Jason looked at her expectantly.

§

Oskar stood up quickly as he realized Den Femte was thinking about Jason again, and was considering *Eli must be there by now. I can't let him go in there! And if she's already in the tunnel with Jason, he'll see that he's gone!* He carefully entered Den Femte's mind, and tried to turn his thoughts to Den Sjätte, and the consequences if he were to be caught snacking.

And it worked, or at least seemed to. Den Femte sighed, and turned back to his book. *What a disgusting, sleazy animal he is*, Oskar thought to himself. He turned the air horn around in his hands idly, as he thought about what would happen once the two of them started up the tunnel, and The Four discovered that Jason was missing. The noise might stop them for a minute or two, but then what? And how was she expecting to get him all that way without being heard? He paced back and forth.

Hannah reached up, took his hand, and stood up beside him. *What's wrong, Oskar?*

I don't think this is going to work, Hannah. If Jason is hurt bad, how is she going to carry him all the way back here? It's impossible! She's really strong, but not that strong.

But surely she thought of that. Didn't she?

If she did, she didn't tell me. Oskar was frightened now. If he hadn't thought of it, why would he think she had?

I've got to do something! Maybe I can scare them if I talk to them. He remembered how startled Den Andra had been when he screamed into his mind while he was spiked to the ground. But he knew it had to be more. 'Startled' wouldn't do it for long.

He took both her hands in his and squeezed them tightly. *Think Hannah! How can I scare them? What can I think at them that will distract them for more than a few seconds?*

I don't know Oskar! They're only afraid of fire. And the sun, of course.

I know, I know. But there must be something I can do. Thinking about fire or the sun isn't going to scare them. Unless...

§

Eli was at her wits' end. Her only solution was a long shot, at best. "Jason. Stand against the back wall facing the door. When he opens the door and goes for you, I'm going to trip him. Get out as quickly as possible and go left. The tunnel is behind the velvet curtain in the back corner. Run as fast as you can. Do you understand?" She pulled the small wooden stool out from under the table. She knew she had to be quick, because once Jason was behind the curtain, he wouldn't be able to see a thing. His life would depend on her being there to guide him up the tunnel.

He nodded, hobbled past her, and pressed his back against the wall. Eli took a deep breath and began pounding on the table with her fist; lightly at first, then gradually louder, until she heard

the creak of his chair. She quickly crouched down beside the door, holding the stool tightly in both hands.

§

It's beginning, Hannah! Get ready. Hand in hand, they stepped down the corridor as far as they could, and held the air horns out in front of them. *On my signal, Hannah.*

Chapter 8: An Inopportune Cure

Oskar was with *Den Femte* as he approached the door. “Where’s the key? I know I left it in the door!” He peered in and spotted Jason pressed against the wall, trembling. He hastily glanced behind him, saw the Rose Door partially closed, and heard *Den Sjätte* working in the corridor. He smiled to himself as he imagined his snack turning into a meal. *If the child is strong enough to stand, he can spare a pint or two more...* He pushed the door open and moved swiftly into the room. “If you cry out, I’ll kill you,” he growled.

He stumbled as his foot caught on something. He tried to catch himself, but it was no use; his body lurched to the right, his head struck the adjacent wall, and he slid across the room into the corner. He caught a glimpse of bare feet as the boy stumbled past him and out the door. *Damn it!* He jumped to his feet and turned...

Oskar saw Eli for the first time through *Den Femte*’s eyes; she was in his face and quite formidable looking, despite her size. She stood in front of him, wide-stanced, eyes golden and blazing, and hands on her hips. He hesitated just long enough for her to turn and scurry out the door, slam it, and lock it behind her. He lunged for the door, but it was too late. Eli had disappeared.

He pressed his face against the bars and watched helplessly as Jason disappeared behind the drapery, then suddenly, she was there again, her angry face almost up against his. She raised her hand over her head, plunged a syringe directly into his right eye like a dagger, and slammed the plunger home. “Now you’ll see who your friends really are!”

She disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared.

He screamed in rage, and jerked back quickly. The syringe dangled from his eye for a moment, then dropped and shattered on the floor.

He hesitated a moment as the enormity of what had happened, and the humiliation he now faced from the others, sunk in. He screamed again in rage and pounded on the bars. *Den Sjätte* was already half-way across the vault. “What’s happened!”

“The boy escaped, with help! *Den Tredje*’s ‘harmless’ little girlfriend is a vampire, no matter what he thought! It’s no wonder she bested him in the tomb! She’s locked me in!”

Den Sjätte looked at him disgustedly, and without hesitation, lunged for the drapes.

“Let me out! We’ve got to warn the others! There may be more of them!” *It’s daytime! Where can she go? She’s trapped herself.*

§

“Now!” Oskar shouted. The twin blasts were almost deafening, even to them.

§

Den Sjätte grabbed the drapes in one hand and ripped them off the rod as he lunged forward. He could see them clearly ahead; no more than 20 meters separated them. The girl had her arm around the boy and they were moving at no more than a fast walk. *She's no vampire or she would be long gone.*

He put his hands to his ears as the sound of the horns almost knocked him off his feet. *They have help.* He now regretted not having warned the others.

He shook it off and started for them again. *Damn it! Whoever they are, I hope they're stupid enough to stay in the tunnel just a bit longer...* Even with his hands over his ears, he was rapidly gaining on them.

§

"Oskar, you were right! He...he's coming again! What are we going to do?" Hannah was terrified.

"Hannah, take this!" He handed her his air horn, brushed past her and opened the door. The bright sunlight blinded him for a second as he stepped out. He stumbled, but threw his arms out in front of him, caught the fence and quickly regained his balance. He stood for a moment in the center of the path with his eyes closed and turned his face into the sun. He could feel it's warmth against his skin. He threw himself savagely into *Den Sjätte's* mind, then opened his eyes wide and stared directly into the sun. "Take this, you S.O.B.!"

The pain was excruciating. It took all his will to keep his eyes open as the pain intensified exponentially. He could feel the tears flowing, yet still he kept them open. He pressed his fingers against his eyelids and forced them open even wider.

"Die! Burn in Hell!" he shouted through his pain and rage. Eli's frail form and beautiful black hair grew larger and larger in his mind's eye as *Den Sjätte*, rapidly approaching, eagerly anticipated the kill.

§

Den Sjätte was almost on them when suddenly the tunnel became as bright as day. The sun bore directly down the shaft and struck him in the face like a sledgehammer. His whole body was on fire. "Die! Burn in hell!" echoed through his head as he fell to the ground, writhing in agony. He leaped up and ran blindly back down the tunnel, caroming off the walls, scraping off large strips of burned, tattered flesh, until he stumbled into the vault and threw himself into the fallen drapes and rolled himself into them. It was no use. It was as though they were transparent. The entire vault was lit by the sun. There was no escape. There were no shadows. A bright pulsing orb encircled him like a living thing, burning him alive, burning him from within. His eyes boiled, then popped like overripe grapes. Suddenly, all became dark. But his screams of agony echoed through the vault until finally, he felt a hard kick in the ribs.

“Get up, you idiot! What the hell’s the matter with you!?” *Den Sjätte* opened his undamaged eyes. *Den Tredje* stood over him, eyes blazing. “Why didn’t you wake us! They’ve escaped! Two children have made absolute fools of us! And you! You and *Den Femte* have a perfect record. You did everything wrong!”

Den Sjätte stood up, still shaking. He felt his arms, his chest, his face. Other than a few jagged rips in his clothing, there wasn’t a mark on him. “We need to talk. The child -- the other one; her brother. He’s not human, but he’s not like us. He did this. He burned me alive, but I’m not burned. It’s impossible, yet he did it somehow. ” He hurriedly explained what had happened in the tunnel.

Den Tredje and Den Fjärde looked at each other. Den Tredje felt a twinge of fear for the first time in over 200 years, as the ghosts of his past rose up to taunt him. Silently, the four of them sat down at the table, and after a few minutes, talked quietly to one another over the dim light from Nils’ old lantern. Den Femte tried to explain to them his version of what had happened. And Eli’s eyes. He felt...a bit strange. He shook it off. Somehow, the idea of sneaking a bit of blood from an anemic boy had no appeal to him whatsoever right now.

§

Oskar dropped to his knees, sobbing. Had it been enough? It had to have been enough, because it was all he had. *Please, God. Let it have been enough!* He heard voices; heard people moving toward him along the path to the gate. *Dad! And Mom!* He slumped to the ground, exhausted.

They arrived just as Hannah, Eli, and Jason emerged from the tunnel. Eli paused long enough to lock the door and slide the façade back in place, then rushed over to Oskar. Dawson went quickly to Jason, checked his pulse, wrapped him in a blanket and knelt down beside him.

“Papa, there’s something wrong with Oskar!” She took Oskar’s hands, and gasped as she relived the whole awful experience. “Papa, he’s burned his eyes! Please help him!”

“We need to get you all out of here! Eli, you and Elaine help Oskar, Hannah, you carry my bag and Eli’s backpack. I’ll help Jason. We need to get him home and transfuse him.”

Eli could tell he was angry. “Papa, I was going to call you as soon as I had him. Please don’t be angry with me. I had to do it.”

As angry at her as he was for putting Oskar and Hannah, and herself, in danger, he knew deep in his heart that she had only done what 2 centuries of conditioning and self-reliance had compelled her to do. It would be of absolutely no use for him to make it even harder on her. Nothing would change, and she’d just feel worse than she already did. She was certainly no ordinary child, no matter how childlike she seemed sometimes. After all, how many normal 13-year old children can handle the level of violence Eli has dealt with? He sighed and forced a smile. “It’s okay, Eli. I do understand. I just wish you could find it in your heart to trust us, and stop relying so much

on yourself. You're not a vampire any more. Please, don't forget that. If we were to lose you, I don't know what I would..." He couldn't continue.

"I'm sorry Papa. I'm really sorry." She put her arms around him.

Elaine flashed her a dark smile. "You really scared him Eli. Please, think it out next time. Sometimes I think you forget how much he cares for you," she said sternly. She knew it had to be said. But she also knew that Nils and Livia would put things back in perspective for her when she returned home to a hero's welcome. At least she'd have a half-hour or so to see the downside to what she had so impulsively done. She bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

Slowly, they worked their way back down the path. Oskar could see nothing but a washed out whiteness. Everything looked like a grossly-overexposed photograph. "Eli, I can't see anything. You'll have to show me where to go." Eli smiled at him, held his hand tightly, and loaned him her eyes.

Dawson took one look at the bruising on Jason's body and his now badly-swollen left ankle, and without a word, picked him up in his arms and carried him the rest of the way.

They piled into Elaine's car while a few curious onlookers, attracted by the loud noises and unusual activity so early in the morning, stared at them from the sidewalk. Eli breathed a sigh of relief as Elaine finally pulled out into traffic.

§

Jason and Oskar were finally given a conditional thumbs-up after Dr. Törnkvist and the Sandstrøm's family doctor had tended to both of them. Jason would be fine, but sore for several days, and his hairline-fractured foot would be in a cast for a month, but he was otherwise okay. However, they had loaded him up with antibiotics after Oskar explained what they had done to him in the van and what *Den Femte* had later done in the vault. Vampires obviously kept good hygiene pretty low on their list of priorities, Jason had joked after he heard the disgusting account as described in lurid detail by Oskar.

Oskar was a different story. Both his retinas had been burned; they weren't sure yet how badly. It would be a week before they could tell him anything definitive. In the meantime, he had to keep both eyes covered; especially in the daytime.

Jonathan had been incredulous when Eli described why his eyes were burned. "Oskar, how were you able to bear the pain? I know grown men who couldn't do what you've done. How old are you? 12?"

"I'm 13." Oskar reminded him. "I'm aging now, remember?"

"Yes, Yes, of course. That explains it. That extra year has made you a man." He winked at Eli and patted Oskar on the shoulder, then stood up quickly, "Now then, let me check Jason one last time and that should do it." He headed back across the hall.

Dawson sat down next to him and put his arm around his shoulder. “He may have been kidding Oskar, but I’m not. I’ve seen real changes in you since you and Eli began aging again, as short a time as it’s been. You think things out, you take your responsibilities more seriously, and you’re even able to move into new areas in school. For example, you’re beginning to understand Calculus on a fundamental level now, as opposed to just plugging numbers into the proper equations and cranking out the answers. You’re genuinely maturing. I’m proud of you; and Eli too. I actually find it a bit exciting to see these rapid changes after all these years.”

Elaine nodded. “As nerdy as that example was, I agree with you for the most part, Rich. There are a few areas in which you’re both still lagging, however. You’re still a bit too impulsive.” She gave Eli a stern look. “But your determination to rectify your own mistakes, Oskar, no matter how misguided you were, was a very mature thing to attempt.”

“Thanks, Mom! I think.” Oskar grinned at her. Jonathan waved goodbye to them from the hallway and headed down the stairs.

“Oskar, I think you should head on over to your room and get some sleep. It’s been a long day. I’ll give you a hand.” Elaine helped him up and guided him through the door. “I’ll send Hannah back over here, Eli. You two need to get some sleep too. Your Papa and I will keep watch tonight, with an exceedingly grateful Nils and Livia, by the way.” She smiled at her as she guided Oskar through the door.

§

Jason was finally feeling almost normal again, after being poked and prodded all afternoon. As soon as Elaine turned off the lights, he put his hands behind his head and lay back on the pillow. Secretly, he was very happy he had been unconscious for most of the time he was gone. He remembered nothing from the time *Den Sjätte* threw him to the ground until just before Eli woke him up in the vault. She, Oskar, and Hannah had been the ones who went through hell for him. His part had been easy, except for the broken foot. He gingerly wiggled his toes in the cast. He regretted that he couldn’t show it off at school and get everyone to sign it, especially that cute new cheerleader he had his eye on. There was nothing like a cast-signing to break the ice. *Oh, well...*

“Oskar? Are you awake?”

“Yeah. I’m not the least bit tired, and I’m bored. A whole night ahead of me, and I can’t play ‘Myst.’”

“I’ll try not to take advantage of you and get too far ahead.” Jason paused, “But I won’t promise anything,” he grinned.

“It won’t do you any good. I’ll beat you anyway! Besides, I know who the good guy is now,” he lied.

“Really?! How’d you...”

“Gotcha!”

Jason slugged him on the arm. They lay there quietly for a few minutes, then. Jason sat up and turned toward him. “Oskar? I...I wanted to thank you for saving my life. You might even go blind because of me.”

“But I didn’t...”

“Look, Oskar; I know you did it to save Eli. But you came with her to save me. You know as well as I do that, if you hadn’t gone with her, she would have eventually turned back. She’s really stubborn, like Hannah, but she’s really smart too. She wouldn’t have come for me alone. And she certainly wouldn’t have risked Hannah’s life. No, she wouldn’t have come for me if it weren’t for you.”

“You saved Hannah’s life,” Oskar said, evenly. “And you believed her about Eli and me even when you didn’t have to; even though you got your parents angry with you. I owe you big time.”

Jason felt a bit embarrassed. “Well, anyway I just wanted to thank you. And if you come to our school, I’ve got your back. And I have some friends who’ll have it too. You can count on it.”

“Thanks, Jason.” He knew he had Eli, but he had to admit; the idea of going back to regular school actually had made him a bit uneasy. His past life was hard to shake off.

§

Oskar still couldn’t sleep. Jason had dropped off almost immediately and was now sound asleep, as evidenced by his slow, steady breathing, but Oskar’s mind was still racing. He kept reliving the instant *Den Sjätte* lunged down the tunnel, reached past Jason, and touched Eli’s hair. He had wanted Eli; Jason was nothing to him. He had lunged for Eli...

“Oskar! Are you awake?” she whispered.

“Eli?” he reached out and...

“No, it’s Hannah. I want you to come sleep with us. Is Jason okay?” she reached past Oskar and ran her fingers gently through his hair. *My big brother! I love you so much.* “Oskar, if you want to stay, I understand.”

“No, he’s asleep. I...I’ll come, but you’ll have to help me. I can’t...” he swung his legs off the bed and stood up slowly.

“I know, Oskar.” she put her arm around him tenderly, and slowly led him across the hall to Eli’s room – to their room. He knew it by heart. He didn’t need Hannah to guide him, but he really didn’t want her to let him go.

She turned him around, put her hands on his shoulders, and gently pushed him down on the bed. Eli put her arms around him, pulled him up against her, and kissed him on the back of the neck. *I miss you, Oskar. Please stay with us tonight.*

Hannah slid in next to him and pulled the blankets up over them.

To Oskar, having Eli and Hannah always on his side was a godsend. He still blamed himself for everything. If he'd been awake none of this would have happened, and nothing they could say would change that. But he couldn't bear the thought of being alone with his guilt. He pulled Eli's arms around him and kissed her hands.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... A deep sadness rose up and overwhelmed him. *Can you ever...*

We forgive you Oskar, even though it was really my fault. Hannah kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you again for my life, Oskar," Eli whispered. She gently turned him toward her, put her head on his shoulder and wrapped her legs around him. He could feel his tension just slide quietly away as he shuddered a moment, then relaxed in her arms. She rubbed his back gently for a while, then sighed softly, pressed herself up against him and squeezed him even tighter. She kissed him on the forehead, then on the cheek, then ever so gently on each eye. He could feel her rapidly-increasing heartbeat against his chest and her breath on his cheek. His face flushed; he kissed her softly, then kissed her again, a bit harder. He thought about how lonely he had been before she was a part of his life, and how much he owed her, and wondered what it was that kept her with him, and made her love him so. He simply couldn't fathom it. He couldn't even get a handle on how HE felt; his emotions were going in all directions. He put his arms around her and kissed her on the neck. He felt her warmth, her unbearable sweetness, her closeness. His own breathing became faster; he could feel his own heart beating now. *What's happening to me? Am I getting sick?* All he could think about was how much he loved her, and how beautiful she was. He felt her shiver in his arms as he pressed his cheek against hers and tightened his grip on her. He felt a hard knot in his stomach as he suddenly realized how absolutely fantastic it felt to be holding her so close... He jerked away suddenly, and sat bolt upright in the middle of the bed.

"What's wrong, Oskar?" Hannah whispered. She looked quickly at Eli. There was an odd look on her face; one she hadn't seen before. "Eli? Are you okay?"

Eli blushed, then ran her fingers through her hair. "I...I'm fine."

"I think I'd better go." Oskar stammered. "Maybe I shouldn't have left Jason alone." *What was that!?* He felt light-headed, and a bit shaky.

"Please, stay." Eli pleaded. "I really want you to...stay."

"I'll go stay with Jason if you're worried, Oskar. You stay with Eli." Hannah could feel an odd tension in the air, but she knew that Eli really needed Oskar with her tonight. She didn't know how; she just knew.

“No!” Oskar and Eli said, in unison. Eli smiled sheepishly at Oskar.

“You have to stay too, Hannah,” Eli said quietly. “Please?”

Hannah nodded, “Oskar?”

Oskar hesitated, “Okay, I’ll stay. But I ...I drank a lot of water before I went to bed. Hannah, why don’t you sleep next to Eli, and I’ll sleep on the outside, so I won’t wake you if I need to use the bathroom. Would that be okay?” *God! Does that sound stupid!*

“But Oskar you can’t see.”

“I think I can find my own bathroom, Hannah.” He smiled at her. “Is that okay with you Eli?” He hoped with all his heart it wouldn’t hurt her feelings. He desperately didn’t want to hurt her any more than his falling asleep on the job had already hurt them all.” *Please say yes.* He felt relieved that she wasn’t touching him right now. He wasn’t sure how much of what had just happened, he wanted her to know. He didn’t understand it entirely himself. He needed to talk to Dad.

“Yes, Oskar.” She reached over and touched him. *It’s okay, Oskar, really. You did nothing wrong. It was my fault. I shouldn’t have...* What? What was it she shouldn’t have done? Touched him? Kissed him? Held him tight? All things she had done countless times before, but she had never felt THAT way before. She felt all tingly just thinking about it. She needed to talk to Mama.

“Good! It’s settled then.” Hannah slid over next to Eli, and Oskar got in beside her. “Now I’m in the middle! It’s the first time!” She lay on her back and gently slid her arms under their heads.

You’re my best friends in the whole world! She pulled them both up against 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 Hannah’s chest.

§

Den Femte felt weak. There was no other way to put it. And his eyes. He was actually having trouble seeing. He had become color-blind, he realized. The only color he could see at all was in the immediate vicinity of the lamp. And surprisingly, he wasn’t hungry.

“I asked you a question! Pay attention!” Den Tredje was irritated. His patience was running out. Den Femte had almost single-handedly undone all his gains with his stupidity. And his standing with the others had also plummeted, once he had admitted to snacking on the boy. They were disgusted with his weakness. The measure of any one of them was how well he could control his beast. It was an inviolable rule. And he had made a mockery of it. He was a weakling, who apparently took none of this seriously enough. Den Tredje looked at him more closely. There was something...odd about him. He smelled strange, like... *No matter.* “You said the girl, Eli,

stabbed you in the eye. Now why would she risk coming back for that? Time was of the essence for them. Why would it have been so important to her?" He examined the remains of the syringe carefully as his thoughts turned again to the boy. Her strange brother, who was different; and quite powerful, if he were to believe Den Sjötte's bizarre story. He was her age, yet she was ageless; yet she wasn't. He was her age in the magazine article, and he's her age now, 14 years later. Yet he's not immortal, nor is she. If this wasn't support for his superstitions, he didn't know what else it could be.

"What do you suppose was in the syringe? Poison of some sort?" Den Sjötte asked.

"Whatever it was, she thought it was important." Den Fjärde mused. He was suddenly aware of a sharp, metallic smell emanating from Den Femte. "You smell. Have you been rolling in something?" he snickered. He knew immediately he had violated decorum, but he felt strangely unconcerned about it. And, oddly, Den Tredje didn't call him on it, as he usually wasted no time in doing. Status was everything in their small world, and he had clearly stepped over the line.

Den Femte felt nauseated, but he knew it was from the awful odors in the vault, and coming from all of them; not the odd ones from himself. "Something's wrong with me! It was that injection!" he suddenly realized. "It's..." his voice trailed off. They were all looking at him now, but in a way he suddenly recognized. He stood up quickly and instinctively backed away from them, as long-forgotten primal fears rose up in him. They stood silently for a moment, and studied him intently. Simultaneously, darkness slowly rose up around him like a cloak. He had to strain to see them at all in the dim light. Their eyes glowed ominously as they slowly became aware of his...humanness.

They slowly moved away from each other, but kept their attention focused on him, and him alone. He knew now that the discussion was over, at least for him. Nothing he could say would matter now; his words would just be meaningless sounds to them. He knew this with a crystal clarity, as did they. He turned and walked swiftly towards the tunnel. He knew with a cold certainty that his only chance now was the rapidly fading daylight. He started up the slope, hands outstretched, feeling his way along the walls. He could see virtually nothing now. He broke into a run, trying to remember all the twists and turns in the tunnel, hoping against hope that they would hesitate just long enough for him to reach the entrance.

He stumbled on something and, unable to regain his balance, sprawled across the floor. He struggled to get up, but it was too late; he felt a clawed hand on his ankle.

He felt another on his right wrist. Another wrapped itself in his hair and jerked his head back on the hard dirt floor. He could smell *Den Tredje's* foul breath as he struggled to get away, to no avail; it was as though his head was in a vise. And the last of his strength had disappeared during his short sprint up the tunnel. He heard a deep sigh as the thing that was *Den Tredje* pressed its mouth against his neck. He felt its disgusting tongue probe his jugular, then felt the sharp pain as it savagely bit deeply into his neck. Another fastened itself to the inside of his left leg, while the third bit directly into his chest over his heart. The last thing he heard in the darkness was the sound of his ribs cracking, and the guttural animal sounds of their feeding frenzy.

Chapter 9: The Plot

Eli rolled over against Hannah, reached out, and fumbled for Oskar's hand. Her eyes opened quickly when she realized he was gone. The sun was already shining through her round window, lighting up the wall over her bed with a bright oval spot that perfectly framed the beautiful cameo that Gudmund had sent them so long ago. *I wonder how many mornings out of the year it looks like that? I hadn't noticed that before.* "The secret of your strength lies in your differences," she read. She thought about how their differences had changed since then. There had been the cure; full of vastly different meaning for each of them. And Hannah. And her implant. And Mama. And how different things were even since last night, after they...

Oskar was sitting on the window seat. She smiled, knowing he couldn't see a thing, but she also knew he often sat there when he was thinking, a habit of his she really liked. She had made it a habit of her own to ambush him there whenever she spotted him. Some of their best talks had started that way. He didn't seem to notice as she quietly slipped out of bed, and sat down beside him. "Oskar? Are you okay?"

"I'm afraid, Eli. I'm afraid things are going to change for us. I've been afraid ever since you've been a...real girl. I thought I'd be happy, but now I'm just scared. I loved you the way you were. Now you're...we're...different. I don't want anything to change."

Eli had to admit, things were definitely different. She even felt different as she put her arm around him and laid her head on his shoulder. She felt closer to him than she had ever felt before, and she didn't know why. "What do you think will happen, Oskar? What are you afraid of?"

"I really liked the way I felt last night, Eli." He looked at her, blushed, and looked away quickly. "You were so...special. I couldn't think straight any more. I liked you so much, I felt..." he couldn't begin to find the words. "It ...scared me." He searched her face for a moment, then. "I was going to get up before you did this morning and go talk to Dad about it, but I didn't."

"Why not, Oskar?" But Eli knew. Papa and Mama had already talked to them before the cure about what would happen when they grew older. But that was then. This was now. And 'now' was nothing like she had imagined it to be. And 'now' had come way too soon. She wasn't ready to talk to Mama either. And she knew how she had felt last night too. Oskar had been... simply beautiful to her; not only someone she needed, as he had always been, but rather someone she ... wanted.

He looked down at his feet, then turned toward her and put his hand gently on her cheek, "Because he would have told me we couldn't sleep together any longer, and I couldn't bear that."

She put her hand over his. "Oskar, we haven't been able to sleep together since Hannah and Jason came. Last night was special. Maybe it was just an accident. Maybe it didn't mean anything; maybe..."

"No, Eli. It meant something." His mind was going in all directions now; and in one direction he had tried to avoid thinking about since last night. He remembered all Tommy's magazines in the

basement, all the whispered stories at school about girls that were ‘easy,’ all the older boys in the locker room talking about girls in not very nice ways. It had all disgusted him. *I’m never going to be like that!* But he couldn’t shake off the idea that it was already too late. He WAS already like that. He knew he hadn’t been thinking about Eli in that brief moment last night. He was thinking about himself; about what HE wanted. And it had scared him. For a brief instant, Eli had been...a thing. A thing he wanted the same way Eli’s vampire had wanted a meal. After all the vivid memories she had shared, these were the most like how he had felt. But he knew he had loved her with all his heart at that same instant. How could he feel both of those things at the same time?

“Eli, I don’t want to get any older. I don’t like this at all! It’s getting too complicated.”

She squeezed his hand. She had no idea what to say to him. She just knew she loved him more than ever, in spite of everything that had happened last night – or perhaps because of it; she wasn’t sure. The only thing she was sure of was that talking to Mama right now was not an option.

§

“They have a cure.” *Den Tredje* stared across the table at what remained of their little group.

“It seems so,” *Den Sjätte* leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “Which explains many of the oddities and seeming paradoxes in the children. And the cure seems to come with additional... corollaries. The boy’s abilities; the little vampire who, in spite of her fearlessness, seems to have only a vampire’s eyes...” he leaned forward, “and Elaine! That’s it! You were fooled! Elaine has only the eyes also. Which would explain why she didn’t make short work of you when she had the chance.” He couldn’t resist twisting the knife.

“No! You’re wrong! She’s also immortal! You must have seen it for yourself,” *Den Tredje* exclaimed. “I have no reason to believe otherwise, and until we have more evidence, we have to assume she’s a vampire.” Inwardly he was seething. He knew *Den Sjätte* was right. *They’ve both make fools of me. And our numbers are reduced to three.* The thought that a slut and a mere child had outmaneuvered them and caused the deaths of two of them, enraged him.

“Perhaps...we should cut our losses and go home,” *Den Fjärde* said, hesitantly. “There’s nothing to be gained by staying. And we have our own business to conduct at home.”

Den Sjätte looked at *Den Tredje* carefully, trying to read his reaction to this ‘novel’ idea.

“Are you afraid?” he growled.

“Not afraid – just cautious. They obviously know a great deal about us; especially about who and what we are; and our – weaknesses. Remember what the girl said to him? ‘Now you’ll see who your friends really are!’ How could she have known what would follow? Elaine couldn’t have known; she’s too young and inexperienced. How did the child know? And her ‘twin;’ exactly like her, down to the freckle on her jaw. But younger...much younger. No, there are too many

impossibilities here. They know too much. That makes them dangerous. And we have no compelling reason to put ourselves in any more danger. Our secret is out, at least to a select group; a group, by the way, that we know absolutely nothing about, including their total numbers. Killing them serves no purpose, and getting them all may be impossible. And I doubt they'll have any inclination to tell anyone about what's going on in their home; or in ours. Our secret is safe with them."

"Enough! I've got an idea, but it'll take a bit of planning, and we can end this once and for all. Then, and only then can you go home and 'conduct your business,' *Den Tredje* said, sarcastically. "First, we're going to need the photographer one last time..."

§

Breakfast the next morning was very different for them all. Jason was still weak, and it was quite apparent to Nils and Livia in spite of his attempts to cover it up; consequently, they were being very protective of him. He hadn't really been the center of attention in this way since a year or two after Hannah had been born, shortly after his second birthday. He had no regrets; he had actually been relieved when their bubbly 'miracle child' had gradually taken more and more of their time as she grew older and more – intense. It took the pressure and attention off him, and, besides, he had secretly loved her as much as they had. However, this morning was unequivocally his. He had not only saved Hannah's life right before his parents' eyes, but had sacrificed himself to do it. This morning, he sat between them, basking in his father's pride and bathed in his mother's unabashed love and gratefulness, and, most treasured of all, their respect; something he hadn't realized he had wanted so much until it was so decisively given to him.

Rich and Elaine had been up most of the night, planning their defenses and arguing about how to best handle the unpredictability and natural fearlessness of Eli, and the blind faith Oskar had in her; a dangerous combination in the best of times. And with a strong-willed, impulsive Hannah in the mix, it had become even worse. "Rich, we have to rein her in!" she had argued, "You can't just keep going on 'understanding' her 250-year-old point of view and, by doing nothing, allow her to continue putting herself and others in danger. We could have lost them all!"

"What would you have me do? Ground her? Take her puzzles away? Put a lock on her door? Put a ball-and-chain on her ankle?" He paced back and forth. "I've talked to her about this many times, and she's always sincerely sorry. She simply cannot keep herself from doing these things, and Oskar's unquestioning love for her is equally unassailable. He will always put her first. And I wouldn't have it otherwise." He was feeling a bit defensive now. They were 'his' children; his bond with them was also unassailable. It had grown with every tragedy he had uncovered in Eli's life, and every dark event that had drawn the three of them together in a triangle of mutual love, trust and support; and they had been alone together, until they had found Elaine – his own wonderful love and the only one of them with a sensible head on her shoulders, his staunch realist. "The only thing that will fix this is time and maturity. And only a certain kind of maturity. They are already mature far beyond their years in some ways; that's why it's so difficult sometimes to direct them properly. They are too old for punishment, too wise for simple admonitions, and too young for any discussion on long-term effects or statistical probabilities to have any effect on them." He sighed. "Time is the only solution." But he had to admit, it had hurt

a bit that she hadn't confided in them; he couldn't help it. And it worried him. Were there other things they were keeping from them now? Their now rapidly-maturing brains were a double-edged sword. Adolescence was a difficult enough time for ordinary teens. And to complicate things, Hannah was never going to be able to keep up. She really was only thirteen years old.

"You're right, of course," Elaine had conceded, "but we have to talk to them more often; perhaps stressing the wisdom of reason over impulsiveness. And we need to watch them all carefully for the results of further changes in their maturity that they don't choose to share with us."

Now, they sat quietly together at the table, deep in thought about all these important decisions affecting Eli's and Oskar's future, in the midst of their on-going battle with real darkness. Elaine couldn't help but think of their concerns as being on a par with rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

Eli, Oskar, and Hannah were clustered together at the other end of the table, but this time, Oskar was between the girls. Eli's chair was hard against Oskar's and she was holding his left hand, white-knuckled-tight, in her lap. Hannah filled his glass with milk, guided his hand to it, and hovered over him, making sure he knew where everything was. He smiled at her, and took her hand gently in his. "Thanks, Hannah." *I love you too, you know.*

Hannah blushed, and quickly pulled her hand away. "Oskar, you promised you wouldn't..." she whispered.

"I'm sorry Hannah. You're being so sweet to me, I couldn't help it." He leaned over and, after one near miss, kissed her on the cheek.

She blushed again, then glanced quickly at Jason, who, thankfully, hadn't noticed a thing. She knew that, if he had, she would never have heard the end of it. Big brothers are big brothers after all. Relieved, she reached down and slipped half a banger to Einstein, who, very discretely, swallowed it whole.

Eli smiled to herself and put her other hand on his, but said nothing; rather she laid her head gently on his shoulder and thought about how much she loved him...and how very handsome he was becoming.

Elaine watched with interest as the little drama unfolded quietly at the other end of the table. She nudged Rich and nodded subtly in their direction. They looked at each other a moment. "I think we need to revisit our talk with them about growing up," she whispered. Rich nodded as he examined their faces carefully, trying to avoid the appearance that he was staring at them. *Why do I suddenly feel so sad,* he thought to himself.

§

During the first few days after the rescue, there was a flurry of activity. Henry's new lamps had been installed at strategic places throughout the house, and the sound system had been tested briefly one late afternoon, to the delight of Jason and Oskar, who stood there grinning, hands

over their ears, as the sounds of heavy explosions and screeching discordant ‘heavy metal’ thundered through the house for a few brief minutes.

Oskar’s prognosis was good, although there were indications that he might have to live with a few ‘blind spots’ for the rest of his life. He was able to dispense with the eye patches after that first week, but had been relieved of his nightly sentry work until Dr. Törnkvist cleared him for duty. Instead, they made random trips to the cemetery during the day so Oskar could eavesdrop on their thoughts. Regular trips were impossible, since there was a better than even chance they were being watched.

Their defenses now meeting with everyone’s approval, their thoughts turned to offense. The first brief daytime trip to the cemetery with Oskar had verified not only the success of the cure of *Den Femte*, but also his resulting death at the hands of the others; an unexpected turn of events that Eli wouldn’t explain to them. Oskar had stopped them from questioning her further, once he had realized that it related to Elias’s experiences in the beginning months of his infection, an especially dark period during his bloody, but brief stay in Göteborg.

§

Eli and Oskar sat down on the small couch in Papa’s study. Papa, in his favorite chair, was flanked by Elaine, sitting on the edge of his desk, legs crossed in front of her.

“We wanted to talk to you a bit about your...sleeping arrangements now that we have a full house,” Elaine began. “I know how hard it must be for you two to have to sleep apart since the Sandstrøms moved in.” She looked at them carefully for a reaction, but got nothing. “Your father and I wanted to remind you that if anything...changes, or if you have any questions about any physical changes you may be experiencing, and this includes changes in you too, Oskar, please come to us.” she looked at Eli. “For example, we know that you could start menstruating any day now, according to Jonathan. I don’t want you to be caught by surprise; either of you. Liva and I have discussed this, and I know that Hannah hasn’t yet begun either, so it just may not be your time yet.”

“Your mother and I do have a favor to ask of you, however. First though, have you had any time together at night since Jason and Hannah began sharing your rooms?”

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. “The night after Eli saved Jason, I went over and slept with them, dad. But Jason was asleep and never knew,” He added quickly.

The sudden color in Eli’s face wasn’t lost on Elaine. “I trust there were no other problems?”

“No, Mama. We were all dressed and downstairs before Jason got up.”

“Good! Now for the favor. We would like you two to refrain from any more late-night rendezvous until after the Sandstrøms have safely returned home again. I don’t want things around here to get more complicated than they are already, and I don’t want either Jason or Hannah put in a position where they would have to lie to their parents about anything. We have

to rely heavily on mutual trust during this period, and anything that disrupts it could endanger us all. Are we understood?"

Yes, mama." Eli said. Oskar nodded.

"After they've left, we'll discuss all this more thoroughly, Eli. We just want to make sure we're kept up to date. We're trusting you both to let us know if you have any difficulties at all with respect to the current sleeping arrangements." Papa smiled at them.

"Okay, then. You two run along now." Elaine stood up, opened the door for them, and watched them until they disappeared down the stairs.

"Something's happened Rich. And they couldn't bring themselves to confide in us. I don't like it at all."

"I think they're just trying to juggle too many things at once, Elaine. They're still mostly children after all, and there's an awful lot going on in their lives right now. I wouldn't worry; they'll tell us when they're ready."

"They should have told us now."

§

Elaine pulled up to the curb across the street from the main cemetery entrance. "Are you sure Oskar?"

"Yes, Mom. There's nothing. No one's here. Should I..." he opened the door.

"No! It's not safe, Oskar. If they've left, there has to be a reason, one of them quite possibly being that they discovered we come here on a regular basis." She pulled away from the curb and drove slowly around the cemetery. She once again pulled over when they reached the small North Entrance. "Try again, Oskar. This is as close as we can safely get to their sleeping area. Can you sense anything at all?"

"No, Mom! Where could they be? Do you think maybe they left for good?"

"Two of them, left to their own resources, perhaps. But with *Den Tredje* still in charge, very unlikely. He's the real thing. He's not going anywhere without having..."

"His revenge, Mom?" All Oskar could think about was Eli. He knew that, besides Mom, Eli was the one *Den Tredje* wanted the most.

"Yes, Oskar. I'm certainly not going to sugar-coat it." She pulled away from the curb and headed for home.

All Oskar could think about lately was that night. And the way Eli had felt in his arms. And how desperately he wanted to protect her from them, to pay her back somehow for...what? Saving his life? Making his life worth saving? No, it was more of an obsession; she was in his mind all the time, especially at night when he lay awake in his own room, thinking of her lying there next to Hannah, in the bed they had slept in together since that beautiful starlit morning when they had come home for the first time in their lives.

§

They gradually relaxed as the next several weeks dragged on with no sign of them anywhere. However, not knowing what the three were up to was still a bit hard for them to handle, especially at night. Oskar, in spite of having been relieved of his night watch, searched for them in the ether as long as he could stay awake some nights, much to the annoyance of Eli, who had to go in the next morning and drag him out of bed.

After doing a bit of reconnaissance in areas suggested by Elaine; areas she knew *Den Andra* had visited often during their 40 years together, they were all hoping that perhaps the remaining three really had given up and gone home. Nils and Livia had actually made a few careful trips back to the house in anticipation of their return home.

§

Dawson looked up from his cup of tea, as Hannah peeked around the corner of the kitchen door. "Hannah! What are you doing up so late? We're going to have to stop meeting like this. Come in and join me!"

She grinned and slipped into her chair. "I saw the light on in the kitchen from Eli's window. I was hoping it was you. I like talking to you." She rested her elbows on the table and put her chin in her hands.

He reached up, grabbed her fairy cup and placed it on the table in front of her. "I just made this pot, so it's good and fresh." He filled her cup and placed the sugar and milk in front of her. "Same pajamas, I see. You make it very easy for me to tell you two apart."

"They're getting pretty old, though, and a bit short." she reached down and smoothed the wrinkles out a bit and tugged on a sleeve. "I have another pair, but I still like these the best."

"I like them too, Hannah. They're so...you."

"What do you mean?"

"They're old and faded, and too small for you, and yet you still wear them. It confirms something about you I already knew; that you put substance ahead of appearance. They bring back pleasant memories for you, as they do for me." He smiled at her. "And they're fairy pajamas. Hannah, I know you bought them originally because you wanted so desperately to

believe Eli was a fairy. And, of course, you were right. She was, and still is, a fairy princess in your eyes – and in mine.”

“I didn’t know...I mean...that you thought Eli was a fairy.”

“Of course she is!” He winked at her. “She rescued Mrs. Dawson from the dungeon and delivered her safely to me, saved Oskar’s life, vanquished three dark lords, and saved the life of her soul mate and kindred spirit, another fairy princess, twice.”

Hannah giggled, “I’m no fairy princess, Dr. Dawson.”

“You are to me, Hannah with an ‘h.’ You were instrumental in helping Eli make one of the hardest choices of her life.” He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. “My only regret is that we’ve inadvertently drawn you and your family into this recent darkness. You are at the age where you should be in school, having fun with your classmates, leading a normal life and stealing the hearts of all the boys.

“I don’t have any boyfriends, Dr. Dawson.”

“Why on earth not? A beautiful fairy princess, and no boyfriends?” he teased.

“I don’t really like boys that much. They’re mostly too...silly. Except for Oskar.” She blushed, “I...I mean I know Oskar is Eli’s boyfriend. I just meant...” she composed herself. “I just meant that if I ever had a boyfriend, he would have to be just like Oskar; just as sweet, just as kind, and just as brave.”

“Oskar wasn’t always brave, Hannah. That’s something that came to him only after he loved Eli, and realized she was worth fighting for. And believe me, any boy out there who is worthy of you will be just as brave. You can count on it!” he paused, “But you’ll have to be patient. I’m quite certain that boys worthy of our Hannah are few and far between. And they’ll have to get past your father and me first.”

She smiled at him, “You’re funny, Dr. Dawson.” But it somehow made her feel really warm inside to think that Eli’s own Papa thought so highly of her.

They both turned toward the door as Jason, still in his pajamas, stepped into the kitchen. “Oh. Sorry! I saw the light and thought Oskar was down here.” He turned to leave.

“Jason? Oskar isn’t in your room?”

“No, sir. I woke up about an hour ago, and he was gone. I went back to sleep thinking he had probably gone to the bathroom, but I woke up a few minutes ago and he was still gone. I saw the light on down here through our window and thought...” his voice trailed off.

Dawson stole a quick glance at Hannah. The look on her face told him everything he needed to know. “Hannah? Do you know where Oskar is?”

“I...I...I’m sorry, Dr. Dawson. He’s with Eli in our room. I ... was sleeping on the window seat, and couldn’t get comfortable, so I came down here.”

“They made you sleep on the window seat?” his voice got hard.

“No, no! It was my idea. I mean...they wanted to...and I thought...” she turned red, “They love each other!” she blurted out.

Jason sat there with his mouth open, and said nothing.

“Jason? Why don’t you go on back to bed? I need to talk to Hannah for a bit. Oskar will join you shortly.” Jason got up quickly and disappeared up the stairs.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Dawson. I didn’t mean to lie to you. I really didn’t...” he could see the tears in her eyes.

He put his hands on her shoulders, “Hannah, you didn’t lie to me. Don’t think that for a minute! I asked you a question and you answered it truthfully. This isn’t your fault.” He sat back in his chair. “Hannah, all I can say is, the two of them have no idea what a good friend they have in you. If they did, they could never have used you in such a manner.” He got angrier just thinking about it.

“Please, don’t be angry with them! It’s my fault! I should never have come down here!”

“Hannah, I’d like you to wait here for me, if you would, please.” He headed for the stairs, then paused a moment and turned back to her. “Hannah? I was wrong about you. I think the number of boys in the world worthy of you has become much smaller in my mind. In fact, I’m not sure there are any at all. Even Oskar.”

He had never been so angry and so disappointed in them before. Making poor decisions that affected only themselves was one thing. Deliberately involving Hannah? Quite another. And he had known for some time now that Hannah had a crush on Oskar. And yet, look at what she was willing to do for the both of them. He took the stairs two at a time, stepped up to their closed door, reached for the knob, and hesitated. He glanced behind him quickly to verify that Oskar’s door was closed.

He took a deep breath, then knocked loudly on the door. “Eli? Oskar? It’s Papa. May I come in?”

Silence. He raised his hand and was about to knock again, when... “Yes, Papa.” *Her voice sounds so small and child-like*, he thought to himself, as he slowly opened the door and turned on the light.

Chapter 10: The Bargain

He saw the pillow and blanket on the window seat, where he easily imagined Hannah, trying to sleep, staring out the window, thinking about ... *God! What could that sweet child have been thinking about?* Hannah's pillow was at the far end of the window seat, away from the bed. His eyes moved to the left; to the bed against the wall, no more than a few feet from the other end of the window seat. He just couldn't bring himself to think about how this scenario would have played out for her.

The two of them were sitting, naked, in Eli's bed, sheet strewn loosely around their waists, holding each other's hand tightly between them. For a brief moment, bathed in the overhead light, he saw...two beautiful children, who, in a parallel, more perfect universe could be the material for a Norman Rockwell painting. "Dad, we were going to talk to you and Mom about this, but with everything going on we didn't want to..." The image vanished abruptly.

"Didn't want to what!? Bother your mother and me with your betrayal of our trust, and, Eli, your utterly reprehensible use of your best friend's love and devotion to you both to help facilitate it? I want you both to get dressed right now, and come down to the kitchen. We need to talk." He paused a moment and opened his mouth as though he were about to say something. He thought better of it, turned, stepped out of the room and closed the door firmly behind him.

Eli felt a knot in her stomach, as memories of her other betrayal of his trust came rushing back – the night she fled the house, fearing she may have killed him with her stupidity. The fact that he had understood that time, was no consolation this time.

This was worse in her own mind; far worse, because, knowing Papa, it was more about their selfishness than anything else. She trembled as she quietly slipped out of bed and began dressing herself.

"Eli, we've done nothing wrong!" But Oskar's heart sank anyway, because he knew better. *Damn! Damn! Damn! Why didn't I talk to Dad like I wanted to after that first night?* But he knew why. And it was going to happen now anyway, whether they liked it or not. "Who does he think he is anyway? He can't possibly understand how it is with us. We love each other more than anything! And we're old enough to make our own choices, Eli. You're old enough to be his great, great, great grandmother." But his argument fell on deaf ears.

"Shut up, Oskar. Just ...shut up!" She couldn't even look at him. She didn't wait for him; she stumbled out the door, still trying to get her foot in her shoe, and disappeared down the stairs. *Why did I think that these things would be different with Oskar? No more! I'm done with it! All it's done for me my whole life is cause me misery. And the first time it doesn't hurt, it hurts someone else.*

The first thing she saw as she entered the kitchen was the look on Hannah's face, and her red eyes. *She's been crying!* She rushed over and sat down beside her. "Hannah, I'm so sorry."

“You’ve said the right thing, as usual, Eli,” Elaine said sarcastically, “But until you understand fully that talk is cheap, it’s just noise.”

Eli felt the sting of her words, and cried silently on Hannah’s shoulder. This was awful, and it was of her own doing. It was her responsibility. And she had disappointed the very people whom she loved the most. And for what?

Oskar slipped into his chair, a wooden look on his face.

“It was my fault, Eli,” Hannah sobbed. “I shouldn’t have come down, but I couldn’t sleep.” She put her arms around her.

“Oh, Hannah! Nothing has ever, ever been your fault.”

“But it is Eli! Oskar, I’m so sorry!”

Oskar’s defiance completely melted away. “Hannah, don’t, please!”

“Stop!” Papa said firmly. “Hannah has absolutely nothing to do with this. Jason saw the light on and came down looking for you, Oskar. He was concerned about you and merely asked where you were. If Hannah hadn’t been here already and answered my questions truthfully, it probably would have taken me a few more minutes to figure it out, but I most definitely WOULD have figured it out – and all without Hannah.”

Papa stood up and kissed her on top of the head. “Hannah, I’d like you to go on up to your room now. We’re going to have a family meeting.” He saw the frightened look on her face, and smiled at her. “Don’t worry, Hannah; there won’t be any casualties. Eli will be back upstairs in a few minutes, unharmed I promise.”

They sat there quietly for a few minutes, until they heard Eli’s door close.

“Why didn’t you tell us about this when we talked in the study earlier? We gave you every opportunity.” Elaine leveled her gaze at Eli. She was terribly frightened for her; she knew first hand some of the things Eli had been through, and she had physically been through even worse herself. And Oskar was too young to understand the pain and conflict he could awaken in Eli, no matter how much he loved her -- and her love for him would make her want to please him and she’d be willing to do anything for him, no matter what it cost her.

“We were afraid you’d...”

Oskar interrupted, “I was afraid you’d make us sleep in our own rooms from now on, even after Jason and Hannah left. It’s my fault. Eli just went along with it.”

“What happened that would make you think that?” Elaine decided she wasn’t going to make it easy for them. They simply had to understand.

“The night after Oskar saved Jason and me, Hannah snuck over and got him for me after Jason was asleep. We hadn’t been together for so long, and I was worried about his eyes...and I was so lonely...”

“This is the time you told us about earlier?”

They both nodded.

“Go on.” She leaned back and folded her arms across her chest.

“I...I can’t. I ...don’t want to talk about it; it’s too embarrassing.” She looked over at Papa, pleadingly.

“Elaine, I think I get the idea. Why don’t we...”

Elaine ignored him and forged ahead, “This ...thing that happened. It happened to both of you?”

They nodded.

“Hannah saw the whole ‘thing’?” Elaine was relentless.

“No! I mean...I was scared and I ...stopped.” Oskar’s face was bright red.

Papa hid a smile.

“What then? Did you decide to keep this to yourselves at that point?”

“No, Mama. Oskar made Hannah sleep between us the rest of the night. It hurt my feelings at first, because I thought I had done something wrong...”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Eli!”

“Be quiet, Oskar. Eli? When did you both decide to lie to us?”

“We didn’t! I mean...the next morning we decided not to tell you ...what happened. It’s not the same thing.”

It became a lie when I specifically asked you if anything happened that night, and you both said, ‘no.’ Correct?”

Eli looked down at her feet. “Yes, Mama.”

“And, because you lied and got away with it, you figured, ‘What the hell, we might as well just keep on doing that ‘thing’ and just not tell anyone about it,’ Correct?”

“No! It wasn’t like that at all!” Eli protested.

“But the results were the same, Eli. Especially when you involved Hannah so you could continue doing your ‘thing.’ Resulting in problems that never would have arisen if you had seen fit to tell us the truth. Now, you’ve put Hannah in exactly the position we explicitly warned you about. She’ll feel she has to lie to her parents, if it comes up. And with Jason in the mix now, the odds it will come up have increased greatly.”

“You’ve made your point, Elaine.” Rich said, quietly.

She ignored him, “What I don’t understand, Eli, is why you seem willing to throw Hannah under the bus!”

“I wouldn’t, Mama! I didn’t want to lose Oskar because of ...that, and Hannah understood. We talked about it for a long time before.... “

“Before what, Eli,” Papa asked softly.

“Before Oskar ever came back to sleep with me.”

“Dad, I was so ashamed! I felt like I was the same as one of those jerks who talks about girls like they were pieces of meat, because that’s the way I felt that first night. And I didn’t want to think about Eli that way. It was awful!”

“No it wasn’t, Oskar. It was beautiful. That you could like me that much was...exciting. I felt so good when you had your arms around me and were thinking those things. Then you...went away so fast, that I could scarcely catch my breath, I wanted you close to me so much...” she touched his hand gently.

“Dad, Eli came to my room while Jason was asleep two times before she was able to convince me to come over again. Every time I touched her, I felt the same. I was disgusted with myself.” He hesitated, “Until she showed me how I made her feel. That changed everything. Once I saw that, I...thought maybe...”

“Papa, Hannah did it. One day when we were out by the pool, she got impatient with us because of the way Oskar was behaving. She made us sit down together, and she asked Oskar what he was afraid of. She took his hands in hers and said he had to tell her, because it was like her telling him not to think about a pink elephant. And he did. He told her that when he was like that; when he didn’t have control, he was afraid he would ... hurt me somehow, because of all the terrible things that had happened to me before I met him. He wouldn’t mean to, but it would happen because he couldn’t stop himself.”

“Then she asked Oskar if he really, really thought he could ever hurt me. She asked if he could, even when he ‘felt like a vampire,’ ever hurt me. She asked him whether or not he could ever hurt me on purpose, no matter how he felt. Then she asked him what he would do if he did hurt me, and we saw the look on his face. And all the time she was asking him these questions, I was holding his hand, too. And we all saw that it was simply impossible for him to do such a thing,

no matter what. He could see how I felt so clearly that he knew he could always stop. That night was the first night he came back.”

“Papa smiled at her. “Any more questions, Elaine?”

“A few, actually. Eli, did you two use...protection?”

She blushed, “Mama, we haven’t done...that. We would never, ever do such a thing with Hannah there. It wouldn’t be ...very nice, and it wouldn’t be ...polite...and, besides, we were afraid. I haven’t been a real girl very long and...”

“You didn’t want to break anything,” Elaine finished for her, an amused look on her face.

Eli blushed again. “...something like that.” She reached for Oskar’s hand. *Oskar, stop grinning. It’s not funny.*

Actually, it is. That’s exactly the way I thought about it. I kept thinking about Dr. Törnkvist’s joke about the owner’s manual.

Why didn’t you tell me?

Because you would have beaten me up. And fighting with you was the last thing I wanted to do – especially then.

“Would you two like to share your little discussion with us?”

“No, Mama!” she let go of Oskar’s hand quickly.

“Well, then. There’s only one more thing we have to do. We have to find a way to keep you two from continuing to ‘not do’ what you were not doing.

“I’m not sure what that means, Elaine, but I think we can trust them now.”

“And why would you think that, Rich? Look where we are now because we trusted them.”

“Dad, I promise I won’t sneak into Eli’s room at night any more while the Sandstrøms are here.”

“I promise too, Papa.” She looked at him shyly, “We don’t really need to any more. We can wait now, because now I know Oskar is okay.”

“Really! And what if we were to tell you we’d like you to hold off until you’re both 18? Could you wait that long?” Elaine figured this was a good time to test their resolve – and their trust .

“But, Mama...”

“Where’s the harm, right Eli? Is that what you were going to say? After all, you’ve been together longer than most marriages last these days, and you know you’re going to love each other for ever and ever, right? And you’re over 200 years old, and Oskar is in his late 20’s. So why not just get right to it as soon as no one’s looking!”

“That’s exactly what I think, Mom.” Oskar said, heatedly. “It wouldn’t be fair for us to have to ...wait.”

“Now Oskar, why do you think I knew exactly what your point of view would be?” she folded her arms across her chest.

“Because it’s right?”

“Was it ‘right’ for you two to lie to us over this and compromise Hannah’s relationship with her family and possibly even with us, if she had lied to your Papa, no matter how unselfish and supportive she was of you both? And startle poor Jason so? Can you imagine what he’s thinking right now? For a different perspective on this, which you both obviously need, can you imagine Jack or Henry handling this situation the way you did?”

Oskar looked to Eli for support, but he couldn’t read her. “You can’t compare us to them. they’re...”

“Adults? Grown, mature adults who take their responsibilities much more seriously than children, like yourselves, can do?” she leaned forward. “Oskar, you and Eli have been through a lot. You’ve become much wiser and more mature than most children your age; but you’re still children. It’s not your fault, but that’s the way it is. I want your assurance that, if your Papa and I finally decide you should wait, then you’ll trust us enough to wait. Are you mature enough to do that?”

“18, Mom? That’s forever!”

She smiled at him. “Only to a child, Oskar. Any thoughts, Eli?”

“No, Mama.” She said, resignedly.

“Are we agreed?”

Oskar sighed. By the look on Eli’s face, he knew he had lost the argument. “We agree. And we’ll prove it to you.” He took Eli’s hand in his and reached for Elaine’s.

“That won’t be necessary, Oskar. We believe you. Now get on up to bed, both of you. Oskar, I’m sure, will have to answer many questions from Jason, but I’m sure he’s up to the task. Eli, be grateful that you have such a unique friend in Hannah. She’s a once-in-a-lifetime friend. Don’t ever take her for granted.”

They watched as Eli and Oskar, hand-in-hand, disappeared up the stairs.

“Why didn’t you allow them to take your hand and seal the deal?” Rich asked.

“Because I know there’s no way they can stay away from each other that long, no matter how sincere they are right now. And I didn’t want to make their sense of guilt too much of a burden for them, as it would have been if they had taken my hand. I was trying to strike a balance.”

“Do you really think we should make them wait that long?”

“Of course not! Most of the reasons for picking that age, don’t apply to them; especially to Eli. But I needed to know they were mature enough to at least think they could make good on that promise. Otherwise we would have needed to come up with another less-satisfying alternative plan.

§

Eli and Hannah were awakened by Einstein’s barking. He had both paws up on the window sill, had pushed the curtains aside, and was staring into the back yard. Eli jumped up and pulled the curtains open. As usual, the yard and pool were brightly lit by the porch lamps, so she could plainly see a man, shirtless and shoeless, lying on one of their lounge chairs. Three of the remaining chairs had also been turned to face the house. “Hannah, they’re here!” She turned and promptly ran into Oskar.

“Eli, *Den Tredje* is in the back yard and the other two are nearby. Dad and Mom are already downstairs with Jason, and Mr. and Mrs. Sandstrøm are on their way. Dad wants you to stay here for now, and watch for any sign of the other two. For some reason, I can’t tell exactly where they are. Hannah, here are your flashlights. Remember, no loud talking unless necessary. You won’t be able to talk anyway, once the speakers come on. Use the signals when that happens. Hannah, if Eli sees anything, use the intercom to let us know. And keep the regular lights off. He flipped on the red switch next to the bed, and the room was suddenly bathed in a dark red glow.

“I know, Oskar, but thanks for reminding me.”

Oskar was already out the door. *He’s so sure of himself sometimes*, Hannah thought to herself. *He’s really cute when he gets so serious.*

Eli opened the curtains about a foot and peered into the back yard. *Den Tredje* smiled up at her and waved. On a hunch, she looked up above the trees into the starlit sky and saw two dark forms circling overhead, 20 meters or so above the tallest tree. “Hannah! The other two are in the air above the house. Tell Papa.” Hannah rushed over to the intercom.

Eli cautiously opened the window and leaned out so she wouldn’t lose them. At the moment, they seemed to be content just circling endlessly up there.

“Good evening Eli. Be careful now; I wouldn’t want you to fall and ruin all my plans for you.”

She glared at him.

“My, what pretty eyes you have. Where on earth did you get them?”

Eli couldn't help herself, “They're mine! I've had them for over 250 years!”

“Really? You don't look a day over 12. I'll bet you're just pulling my leg.”

“Think what you want. I could care less.”

“That's a cute accent you have, Eli. I hadn't noticed that before. You sound...Swedish.”

Eli kept her eye on the circling figures. “So do you! *Den Tredje*, ‘The Third.’ Whatever happened to *Den Första*? ‘The First?’ I heard that his own son beheaded him.”

“Ahh! Saw that first hand did you? You were there? Otherwise...” his eyes were gleaming.

Eli folded her arms across her chest and smirked at him. “I was alive and nearby, at least.”

He raised his hand in the air, gave a little wave, and smiled back at her. The two dark figures instantly stopped circling and disappeared over the top of the house.

Eli slammed the window, ran for the bathroom, and peered out the window. She got there just in time to see the two of them land in the middle of the street directly under the streetlight, and retract their wings. They stood there for a moment, hands on their hips, then one walked slowly to the right towards the side of the house, while the other went left, towards the corner. Eli saw the front porch light come on at the Shaw's house across the street.

“Hannah! Tell Papa they've landed in the street in front and are headed towards both sides of the house.” She watched until they were both out of sight, then returned quickly to the back window. She got there just in time to see *Den Fjärde* walk into the back yard through the side gate, and sit down next to *Den Tredje*. A moment later, *Den Sjätte* vaulted over the fence on the right, circled the yard between the pool and the back fence tree line, and sat down in the lounge on the other side of *Den Tredje*.

Why didn't they just land in the back yard, she thought to herself. What are they up to? “Come on, Hannah. Let's go downstairs.

When they reached the first floor landing, they noticed Jason, sitting on a chair next to the front door, peering through the front window. “Did you see that Eli? They just landed there in the middle of the street! It's like they didn't even care if anyone saw them!”

“Yeah. I noticed. Is everyone else in back?”

Jason nodded. “I've got sentry duty out here for now.”

Eli and Hannah hurried onto the back porch. “Oskar! What are they up to?”

“I don’t know, Eli! I’m only getting bits and pieces. It’s as though they’re consciously trying to keep me from getting in. How could they do that? And how could they know?”

“Oskar, they know because of what you did to *Den Sjätte*. But I don’t know how they’re keeping you out. I couldn’t do that myself, remember?”

He nodded, as he remembered all the experiments with the deck of cards back in Karlstad. “Dad doesn’t understand it either, Eli. But I do get some things. I knew they were coming into the back yard as soon as they landed, so I can get some things.”

“Rich, they have...small welding torches of some kind. Do you suppose they’re going to try to burn us out?” Elaine pointed to several small canisters *Den Sjätte* had just pulled out of a backpack he was carrying, and a two-liter gas can brought in by *Den Fjärde*.

“It’s possible, Elaine. And it’s one of the things that I was a bit worried about. But I honestly didn’t think they would attempt it. All we have to do is to stay in here long enough for the police and fire department to get here, and then we could all exit safely and they could do nothing without exposing themselves. The sprinkler systems we installed would slow the fire down enough, and we all know the drill.”

Den Tredje stepped up to the screen door. “May we come in?” he asked politely.

“What do you want?” Dawson move a step back from the door.

“Quite simple, really. All we want is Elaine. It’s nothing personal. We have an obligation to honor the death of our compatriot.” He slapped his forehead. “Oh, how silly of me! I forgot. We’re going to need Eli too. After all, she was the direct cause of *Den Femte*’s unfortunate death. That’s it. Send them both out and we’ll be on our way, and we give you our word that we won’t burn your house down and kill you all.”

“What are they doing, Mama?” Eli whispered. “They know Papa won’t send us out. What are they up to?”

Elaine was feeling more and more uneasy. “I don’t know, butterfly. Perhaps they’re just being sadistic; I don’t know. Oskar?”

“Sorry, Mom. All I know is that they are really enjoying themselves. They all think this is great fun, and they’re sure they’re going to win.”

§

From his position next to the front door, Jason watched with interest as a police car pulled up in front of the Shaw’s house. The policeman got out of the car, glanced in his direction, then continued on up the walk to the Shaw’s front porch and knocked. The door opened quickly. The

policeman turned around again, and looked at the house. After a brief discussion with whoever was at the door, he tipped his hat and started across the street towards Jason, after pausing for a moment to make a call from his car.

§

“You already know the answer.” Dawson was getting nervous. He had sent Nils and Livia to Oskar’s and Eli’s rooms in case there were something going on higher up on the structure that they couldn’t see from here.

“What a shame! And it’s such a nice house too, I’d guess it’s approaching its 150th birthday. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this. He turned on his torch, lit it, and carefully adjusted the flame until it was a nearly-invisible pale blue. He raised it in front of him and watched casually as a large spot on the screen sparkled for a brief instant, then disappeared in a small puff of acrid smoke, leaving a gaping hole in its place. He began playing the flame against the door frame, watching the paint bubble and blacken.

“Papa! What are we going to do? We can’t let them...” Eli was frantic.

Papa put his finger to his lips and turned back to *Den Tredje*. “You’re bluffing. You know this can’t work. I ask you again: What do you hope to gain with these games?”

§

Jason eagerly opened the door as the policeman walked swiftly up the sidewalk.

“Hello there, young man. Is your father home? Your neighbor reported that he saw two men enter your back yard. One went through the side gate, and the other climbed over the side fence. Is everyone okay here? I’ve already called it in and another car is on its way. We need to make sure you’re all safe inside before we can secure the back yard.”

“Boy are we ever glad to see you!” Jason breathed a sigh of relief. “Dr. Dawson is in the back. I’ll show you.” He turned and headed for the back porch, with the officer right behind him. “Dr. Dawson! The police are here! Your neighbor across the street called them because he saw them go into the back yard!”

Rich and Elaine spun around as the officer stepped onto the back porch. Without a word, Elaine lunged for him, caught him mid-waist and threw him to the ground.

He grunted, pulled out his baton, struck Elaine a glancing blow on the shoulder, stumbled to his feet and lunged for the back door. He jerked it open just as Richard grabbed him around the neck, but it was too late. “You can come in!” He shouted. *Den Tredje* stepped inside quickly, followed immediately by the others.

Chapter 11: The Fall

“The lights! Get the lights,” Richard shouted.

Den Sjätte grabbed him around the neck. “Shut up, or you’re dead!” He threw him to the ground and kicked him hard in the side of the head. Richard went limp. *Den Sjätte* rolled him over to make sure he was unconscious, then slipped quietly into the darkened kitchen.

Den Tredje stepped over Richard and grabbed Elaine by the hair. He lifted her off the ground like a rag doll, stared into her eyes for a moment, then bent her head back and bit her hard on the neck. She jammed her thumbs in his eye sockets, to no effect, then braced her feet against the wall and pushed hard, trying to throw him off balance. He stumbled, quickly recovered, then moved away from the wall, where her legs flailed about ineffectively a foot off the ground. He pinned her arms to her sides in an iron grip, pressed his mouth firmly against her neck and bore down even harder. She could feel him feeding on her now. She knew she hadn’t but minutes before she would lose consciousness.

The children had all vanished before *Den Fjärde* could get past the others to grab them. Angry at his miss, he jerked the officer to his feet. “Get out!” he hissed, baring his teeth, “Go home now, and forget, lest we forget all the favors you’ve done for us over the years.” The photographer stumbled across the living room and out the door, passing Jason, who was crouched in the corner next to the door. He hesitated a second. *Screw it! He’s their problem now.* Without looking back, he walked swiftly across the street, where another man stepped out of the shadows on the already-darkened porch, hurried down the Shaw’s sidewalk and met him at the car. They drove silently around the corner before they turned the lights on and sped off.

In spite of the noise downstairs, Nils and Livia waited by the lamp. Their instructions had been explicit. No deviations. As soon as they heard Richard shout, they had quickly descended to the second floor and taken their assigned positions. All they could think about was the children. Where were they? Hannah and Jason should be with them. But they weren’t. Oskar and Eli were supposed to be at the top of the third floor landing with Elaine. But they weren’t. And Richard was supposed to be in the basement, which he clearly wasn’t, judging by the noises. A quick movement by the stairs caught Nils’ eye and he reached for the switch. There was a single, quick flash of green from Oskar’s flashlight, then he disappeared up the stairs. *Where’s Eli? And Elaine?*

Jason watched their car pull away from the curb, then quickly closed and locked the door, and ran for the light switch. He stumbled and almost fell as Eli leaped out the basement door, brushed by him and headed full-speed for the back porch.

Den Tredje slowly relaxed his grip on Elaine as he felt her weakening in his arms. He knelt down and slowly forced her, still struggling, onto her back as he continued to feed on her. His euphoria was heightened by his triumphant sense of vengeance fulfilled, and her final total surrender to him, as her eyes slowly closed and she slipped into unconsciousness. *Just a few moments more, you bitch!*

Eli rounded the corner, saw *Den Tredje* on top of Mama and let out a deep, primal scream of rage. She leaped towards them, landed heavily on his back, and plunged the syringe squarely into his bare back between his shoulder blades with one hand, and stabbed him in the neck up to the hilt with an ice pick she held tightly in the other. The room became instantly blue-white brilliant as Jason threw the high-intensity Elilamp switch.

Den Tredje rolled off Elaine and grabbed Eli around the neck, but before he could tighten his grip, the room was flooded with light...and fire. He was being burned alive. He leaped to his feet, threw Eli against the wall and, in spite of the excruciating pain, lunged for the light. He tore it off the wall amidst a shower of sparks, and threw it at Jason, who barely ducked away in time. Jason crouched low and scurried up the stairs to the second floor as the dining room became instantly dark once again. In a red haze of pain, *Den Tredje*, on his knees, watched helplessly as Eli stooped down over her mama and pressed her hand to her neck to stem the flow of blood. She tore off her shirt, wrapped it firmly around her mama's neck, glanced at Papa, and with a sigh of relief, saw that he was still breathing. She stooped down briefly and pressed her cheek against Elaine's. *Oh Mama, please, please don't die!* Then, golden eyes blazing, she brushed past him and paused at the foot of the stairs. "I'm responsible for the death *Den Första*," She taunted him. "I stole the egg. And it was I who spiked *Den Andra* to the ground in front of my tomb while Elaine was still shackled in the vault. To his credit, it took two spikes to hold him until he died in the morning sun. But I really enjoyed watching him burn." She turned and disappeared up the stairs.

His head spun as he willed himself to heal, but he knew these were the most difficult injuries for his kind to handle and they took a real toll on his resources. His rage grew as the significance of what Eli had just told him, sank in. *The egg! No one could have known but the one who took it.* He glanced back at Elaine, hesitated a moment, then started for the stairs, imagining what his next small meal would taste like. He was already hungry again.

§

Hannah had ducked into the kitchen, just as *Den Tredje* pushed his way through the screen door onto the porch. She quickly slipped into the pantry and pulled the door shut behind her. She fumbled around in the dark, feeling her way along the shelves until she felt the familiar shape of one of the Elilight flashlights that Dr. Dawson had placed throughout the house, then slipped her own small emergency flashlight in her pocket and gripped the much heavier one tightly in her hands in front of her and waited.

She heard someone step into the kitchen no more than a few seconds later; then, nothing. She heard thumping noises coming from the porch and dining room, and the sounds of a struggle, heard *Den Fjärde*'s curt dismissal of the policeman, then finally, more steps in the kitchen.

"The children were all here when we came in, but are gone now," *Den Sjätte* whispered. "Go to the right down the hall and check the garage and Elaine's studio. Bring back anyone you find, alive. *Den Tredje* wants to deal with them in his own way."

Hannah breathed a sigh of relief. So far, Jason, Oskar, and Eli were safe.

Den Fjärde slipped around the corner and headed down the hallway. *Den Sjätte* hesitated a moment, watching with disgust as *Den Tredje* continued feeding on Elaine. *He's completely lost it. He's incapable of being objective. We should be rounding up the others before they can call for help, rather than exacting personal revenge. He's endangering us all with his stupidity and single-mindedness.*

He stepped back as Eli screamed and lunged for *Den Tredje*.

This child is not a vampire, yet has the soul of one. There's much more here than meets the eye. He gasped as the porch and dining room were suddenly mid-day bright, and reflexively stepped further back into the shadows.

In the brief moment of silence following the returning darkness, he could clearly hear the sound of breathing nearby. *One of the children is here!* He immediately crouched down next to the pantry door, and put his nose to the crack beneath it. *The girl, Hannah!* He paused for a moment, trying for the first time to decide where his loyalties ultimately lay; whether with an aging, crumbling organization which had become increasingly impotent under the leadership of *Den Tredje* and his superstitions and obsessive desire for vengeance, or with himself and his own interests back home in Stockholm. His thoughts were interrupted by Eli's taunts of *Den Tredje*. He watched, detached as she vanished up the stairs. *Well! That explains everything, except the very existence of the little one on the other side of this door.* His curiosity got the better of him and he gently but firmly opened the door.

"Well! Good evening, Hannah." He held out his hand. "Come out quietly and I won't harm you." His voice was soft, reassuring.

She closed her eyes and turned her head to the side, "Please, don't..."

The instant he touched her hand, he was simultaneously blinded, then burned with a brilliant burst of white light. He recoiled backwards, fell over the kitchen table, recovered quickly and lunged for her feet. The next burst of light struck his hands like a blowtorch and he jerked them back quickly.

"Please, just go away," she pleaded, "I don't want..."

"Hannah, give me the lamp. Or I'm going to get very angry with you." He slowly reached out for her.

Hannah was trembling so hard now she could barely hold the light. "Please, just go away; please!"

"I can't do that, Hannah. Now if you'll just..." He lunged for her.

His chest sizzled and burned as the full force of the beam struck him. She held the button down firmly and raked the beam back and forth across his body, then aimed it directly at his face and

stepped out of the pantry. Still trembling, she followed him as he stumbled into the dining room, past Elaine's motionless form, and onto the porch, where he dodged out of the way and grabbed for Dawson's unconscious body. *Clearly, this is the one who's the source of all these problems. Just one quick twist of the head and...*

"Don't!" she screamed. Once again, she directed the beam at his face and stepped toward him. He felt the flesh on his face blacken and slough away, felt his eyelids shrivel and shrink back into his head, exposing his eyes to the full effects of the beam.

He screamed in agony, stumbled into the back yard with Hannah on his heels, raking his back with the full force of the light. He turned and hissed at her as he raised his arms over his head, willing his wings into existence. She backed away, momentarily intimidated by the sudden unfurling of his huge jet-black wings, then gritted her teeth and once again pressed the button. He cried out in anger and pain as the beam from her light cut sparkling slices out of his wings as fast as he could grow them until, in desperation, he turned and ran for the side fence and vaulted into the darkness, leaving Hannah suddenly alone, sobbing in the glare of the backyard floods.

She took a deep breath, then ran back into the house and knelt down by Eli's Papa. "Dr. Dawson! Please wake up! Mrs. Dawson is hurt bad! Please!" She gently patted his cheeks and shook his shoulders.

He groaned, rolled over, and with Hannah's help, stumbled to his feet, but he fell again as he saw the pool of blood around Elaine's neck. He scrambled over to her and checked her pulse and breathing, then breathed a sigh of relief. "Hannah, please call Jack and tell him what's happened and that we need whole blood for Elaine right away. Then grab another Elilight out of the hutch, get a blanket from the bottom drawer, and come back here as fast as you can. And no matter what happens or what you hear, don't go any further into the house. I have to keep you safe."

Hannah smiled at him, stepped back into the kitchen and reached for the phone.

§

Den Fjärde moved swiftly down the hall, checking the small storeroom, then entered Elaine's studio. He sniffed the air, then carefully opened each of the storage cabinets along the wall. Nothing. He stepped into the garage and repeated his search, even leaping up into the rafters above the garage and looking into the small attic. He heard screams from the kitchen, recognized the voice as Hannah's and listened carefully as the noise moved suddenly to the back yard. He quietly stepped out the back door of the studio, just in time to see *Den Sjätte* backing towards the pool, and Hannah advancing on him with a small sun in her hands. His jaw dropped as she raked it across his wings and he watched in horror as finally, *Den Sjätte* fled across the lawn and leaped over the fence. He snapped out of his trance when he saw her back was toward him and the lamp was off, at least for the moment. As she stood there crying, he realized that this would be the perfect chance to grab her. He started for her, when suddenly the second-floor windows were brilliantly lit with what was clearly a much more powerful version of the same unearthly light. He heard *Den Tredje* cry out in pain, and made a quick choice; one he had been mulling over for days now as the very foundation of their group had continued to crumble under

Den Tredje's leadership. He turned, and without a word, unfurled his own wings and headed for home. He looked back only once, and saw *Den Tredje* hurl himself through the third-floor window and land hard on the back-yard patio. He never looked back again.

§

Eli rushed up the stairs, flashed her blue light down the hall on the second floor, then scrambled up the stairs almost bowling Oskar over on the third floor landing. "Eli! What happened? Are you okay?" He hugged her tightly. "Where's Mom? And Dad?"

"Downstairs, Oskar." she didn't feel like elaborating; it would just scare him all the more. "Where are the others? Where's *Den Tredje*?"

"I can see them all clearly now, Eli! He's coming after you! He's on the second floor landing," he whispered.

Good! He's left Mama and is coming after me! Eli leaned over the railing, aimed her flashlight down the stairs and flashed her blue light three times. The second floor hallway was immediately flooded with the now-familiar blue-white Elilight. *Hannah's mom and dad are okay.* She breathed a sigh of relief. But in the back of her mind, all she could see was Mama lying on the dining room floor in a pool of blood. She didn't even know if she would ever see her again alive.

Jason stood next to Nils as the light came on, illuminating the hallway clearly, all the way to the other end of the house. And caught directly in the beam was *Den Tredje* as he passed the second floor landing. He grunted as the powerful beam struck him, then quickly reached down and tore a huge section of carpet off the hall floor and, using it as a shield, started haltingly down the hall towards them. Nils pulled Jason back behind Livia, slid quickly along the wall, stepped into the open study door, and waited until *Den Tredje* was opposite the door. He stepped back and turned on his small Elilight, catching *Den Tredje* directly in the face. He reached for Nils blindly, missed, caught the full force of the main beam streaming down the hall and retreated back toward the stairs, growling with rage. He ducked around the corner, caught Eli's scent and headed up the stairs to the third floor.

Eli heard him coming and threw the switch. The Elilamp, anchored just above the bathroom door, lit up the short hallway with its tight intense light beam, just as *Den Tredje* rounded the last landing. He ducked down quickly below the last riser, raised the carpet in front of him and moved swiftly towards Eli. Oskar grabbed her arm, pushed open her door, and jerked her into the room. As soon as the door opened, Einstein lunged past them both, grabbed *Den Tredje's* ankle firmly in his teeth and shook him like a rag doll, remembering, as only such a loyal, devoted friend could do, how one of these...things had treated his beloved Hannah only a few days ago. His hatred of these... 'things' knew no bounds. He released his grip, got a better one higher up on his inner thigh, and bit down hard.

Den Tredje, thrown off balance by the ferocity of the attack, dropped the carpet, caught the full force of the lamp, and lunged for Eli's open door, dragging a snarling Einstein in with him.

Oskar had the window open and was helping Eli over the sill onto the roof when *Den Tredje* tumbled into the room with Einstein still attached firmly to his inner thigh. He bared his claws and grabbed Einstein by the neck just as Oskar raked his bare arm and back with the beam of his Elilight. With a mighty effort, he shook Einstein off and scrambled towards the window just as Eli's beam merged with Oskar's and struck him squarely in the chest.

He swung blindly at Eli, then at Oskar and finally, with a scream of rage and Einstein nipping at his heels, leaped through the window, rolled across the porch roof and landed hard on the patio below. He leaped up and headed for the screen door, but was stopped immediately by a blast of light from inside the house.

"Papa! Is that you?" Eli screamed. She and Oskar quickly stepped off the roof back into her room.

"Yes! Keep your lights on him!" His voice had never sounded so good to her.

Eli and Oskar, aided by Papa, raked their beams of light back and forth across the back yard as *Den Tredje* dodged them, trying to get to the screen door. He finally gave up the battle, unfurled his wings, leaped into the air and disappeared over the top of the house.

"Is everyone okay? Nils, Liva and Jason?"

She turned to Oskar questioningly. He nodded. "We're all fine, Papa. Is Mama okay?" Eli shouted.

"She's weak, Eli, but she's conscious. Jack, Henry, and Jonathan are on their way. Hannah's here with Mama and me. Oskar, where's *Den Fjärde*?" Papa stepped out on the patio and waved to them.

"He's...he's gone, Dad!" he paused as he probed him more closely. "He's flying north, not toward the vault. He's done! He's going home! And So is *Den Sjätte*." He broke into a wide grin. "Hannah did it, Eli. Hannah beat him! All by herself!" He simply couldn't imagine such a thing.

"And *Den Tredje*?"

"He's going back to the vault, Dad. He's thinking...crazy thoughts. All he's thinking about is how we're all going to die. He's flying really high and keeps circling back toward the house then turning back again. I can see our house now, and the cemetery when he turns, he's up so high. He's burned really badly, and one of his wings has a long tear in it. And it hurts."

"That's impossible, Oskar. Wings are the first to heal. And we never hit his wings with the light," Eli said, a puzzled look on her face. Then the light dawned. "Papa, I injected him! I didn't think I had pushed in the plunger, but I must have! But why is it working so fast?"

“We injured him terribly, Eli. Remember how long it took you to heal after your sun exposure? Perhaps he’s reduced his incubation time repairing his injuries. Oskar? What’s he doing now?”

Oskar turned white as a sheet. “Dad, he...he’s falling! His wings are all stringy and he’s falling! He’s falling really fast! I can’t...” Oskar jerked himself away from him. He couldn’t bear going through another death like he had with *Den Andra*. And he refused to accept the fact that there could be anything beautiful about his soul. He wasn’t going back.

“What happened, Oskar? Where is he?”

“I don’t care! I don’t want to...”

Eli took his hands in hers. “I know it’s hard Oskar, but we have to know! Please, Oskar.”

Reluctantly, Oskar reached out to him, but there was nothing. “He’s...gone! I can’t see him anymore. He must be too far away now. He couldn’t have landed yet. He was too high.”

Papa sighed, “There’s nothing we can do about it now, Oskar. Don’t worry. If Eli is right, he’s been rendered harmless even in the worst case scenario. As a human, we can utilize law enforcement to handle him if he tries anything. We know all his human contacts and the photographer has many skeletons in his closet that we can use to our advantage. Now, why don’t you gather up the Sandstrøms and come down here? I’m getting hoarse talking to you way up there.”

Eli turned and was instantly bowled over by Einstein, who licked her face mercilessly. She grabbed him around the neck and hugged him fiercely. “You saved our lives, Einstein. You’re a hero now. Just you wait until tomorrow morning at breakfast. You’ll see how grateful I can be!”

As she scrambled to her feet, Oskar handed her a shirt. “I certainly don’t mind if you want to go downstairs like that, but we wouldn’t want to startle poor Jason again,” he kidded.

She blushed, “Shut up, Oskar.” She grabbed the shirt out of his hand, wrapped it around his neck and hugged him. “I love you so!” she whispered in his ear.

§

The eight of them stood around the bed as Jonathan adjusted Elaine’s bandage. “I think we need to let her get some rest. She’s completely out of danger now, but I’m staying for the rest of the day, just in case.” He shooed them all away, but Eli lingered behind for a moment. “Mama, I’m so sorry we lied to you. I didn’t mean to; it just kind of ...happened. And I was afraid you’d die before I could say I was sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Butterfly. I was a bit hard on you, but you’re older and tougher than Oskar. I knew you could take it.” She winked at her. “I will always love you and don’t you ever forget it. And if that’s the only mistake you ever make, I’ll have to consider you a saint. Now shoo! Go give Oskar a big hug for me.”

Papa was waiting for her outside the door. “Eli, why don’t you all go up to bed? You must be exhausted after everything that’s happened. We’ll take it from here. Jonathan, Jack, and Henry are going to help us get the house back in order, and make it Vampire-resistant again. Only then will we come to bed; probably much later this morning. And Jack and Henry will stay, just in case. We don’t want you children to have to worry about anything.”

“But Papa, they’ll always be able to come in the back door from now on. What are we going to do?”

He smiled at her, “Quite simple, Eli. Next week we’re going to move the door over about 2 meters. That creates a new entrance; one they can’t breach. The old one will go away. I always wanted the door closer to the end of the porch anyway. Also, with the door gone and windows in its place, you’ll get a better view of the back yard from the dining room.”

“You’re so smart Papa. Will I be that smart when I grow up?” Her eyes twinkled.

He grabbed her and spun her around. “Eli, I don’t know what I’m going to do when you grow up and leave me. It’s going to be so boring here without you around to keep me on my toes.”

“But Papa! We’re never going to leave. We’re going to stay with you forever!”

“I’m so relieved to hear that, Eli. I was not looking forward to that day.” He smiled at her. But he knew they would eventually leave. She’d want to try new things and have her own place, where Oskar and she could live however they pleased without their parents trying to tell them what to do. He deliberately put it out of his mind, took her hand in his, and walked her up the stairs to her room, where Hannah was waiting for her with Einstein. They passed Jack and Henry on the stairs, dragging the torn piece of carpet and a garbage can behind them.

Jack winked at her. “Your room is spotless, Eli. Let’s see how long you can keep it that way.”

“What do you mean?! My room is always clean!” She punched him on the arm. “Thanks, Jack! You too, Henry.”

Hannah smiled at them as they came in, “They’re so nice, Mr. Dawson, especially Jack. He spent the whole time telling me stories about when they were Eli’s age, and all the things they did. And Henry is really funny.”

“Well, I hope they didn’t tell you everything. I wouldn’t want you to get any new ideas; you’re dangerous enough on your own.” He tousled her hair.

“Too late, Papa; I’ve already told her the good stuff.” She plopped down on the bed next to her.

Papa gave Hannah a hug, and quietly closed the door behind him as he left. *She looks so sad*, Eli thought to herself. “Oh Hannah! It must have been awful for you in the kitchen! You were so

brave! To chase *Den Sjätte* outside like that must have taken a lot of courage.” Hannah already had her fairy pajamas on and Eli could tell she had been crying.

“Please, Eli. I don’t want to talk about it right now. Maybe tomorrow, okay?” she looked down at her feet.

“Okay, Hannah,” she said softly. “My kindred spirit.” She hugged her, smelled her lavender shampoo, and realized she probably smelled like a pig. “I’m going to take a quick shower, Hannah. I’ll be right back.” She grabbed her pajamas and headed for the bathroom.

Hannah looked up as she heard Oskar and Jason coming up the stairs. Jason went directly into Oskar’s room, but Oskar hesitated outside her door for a second, then stepped in quietly and sat down beside her. “Hannah? Are you okay?”

That did it. She burst into tears and put her arms around his neck. “Oskar, I can’t stop thinking about him, how his eyes looked when he reached for me; how his voice sounded, how he smelled, and the look on his face when he tried to grab your dad and...” she sobbed on his shoulder. “I told him to go away, but he wouldn’t...”

Oskar got it all, in vivid detail. He squeezed her tight and rubbed her back gently. “Eli will be back in a minute, Hannah. You two should try to get to sleep. Talk to Eli. She’ll understand; I know she will! And if you need anything at all, I’m just across the hall.” He desperately wished he could stay, but he had promised Mom and Dad...

She smiled at him. “Thanks, Oskar. I feel a little better now. You always make me feel better.”

Reluctantly, he got up and headed for his room, but hesitated again outside the bathroom. He looked back at Hannah, then quietly slipped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Hannah lay down, slid back against the wall, and pulled the blanket up around her chin. She glanced over to assure herself that the drapes were drawn, then closed her eyes and waited patiently for Eli.

Eli was back in just a few minutes, smelling like bubble bath and roses, and snuggled up against her. “Oskar showed me everything that happened, Hannah. I’m so sorry.” She rocked her gently in her arms. Hannah looked up as she heard the bathroom door open again, and watched Oskar, now in his pajamas, slip into his room, still drying his hair with a towel. She smiled to herself, and hugged Eli even tighter.

§

Elaine rolled over when she heard the door open, then close quietly again. “Mom? Are you awake?” Oskar whispered.

“What is it, Oskar? Is something wrong?”

“No Mom. It’s just that...I wanted to...Jason is really upset about everything that’s happened today and went down to his Mom and Dad’s room to sleep, and I thought, if it would be okay with you...”

“Yes, Oskar. Go ahead. But no window seat for Hannah.”

“Really?”

“Really. Go!”

He hugged her. *Thanks, Mom!*

And Oskar? Be careful with her. She’s much more fragile than you think.

This is for Hannah, Mom.

She sat up in bed, surprised. “For Hannah? What do you mean?”

He took her hands in his and showed her.

§

Hannah was still trembling in Eli’s arms. Nothing Eli said had helped at all. She felt so guilty. “Hannah, none of this would have happened if I had just left you alone. If I hadn’t come over that first night to find you, you’d be asleep in your own bed now, without a worry in the world.”

“I wouldn’t trade you and Oskar for anything, Eli. I’m just scared, that’s all. There’s nothing to be done about it.” She heard the door open behind her and turned around.

Oskar slid into bed beside her, grinning. “Hi Hannah. I bet you never thought you’d see me here again so soon.”

Eli raised herself up on her elbow. “Oskar! You talked to Mama?”

“Mama said it was okay, Eli. I just talked to her. Jason’s downstairs in his parent’s room.” He leaned over and kissed her. *You really smell good!*

She blushed, and grinned at him. *You too.*

“Are...are you really going to stay, Oskar? I’ll go sleep on the window seat.” Hannah started to get up, but Oskar gently pushed her back down. “You’re staying right where you are, Hannah. I’ll only stay if you stay. He ran his fingers through her hair and kissed her on the forehead.

She smiled up at him. “Okay, Oskar,” she said softly. She was relieved; she really hadn’t felt like sleeping alone tonight.

Oskar settled in next to Hannah, put his hand gently on her cheek for a moment, then took her in his arms. She sighed softly and put her head on his shoulder.

She felt the warm sun on her face as she lay on the air mattress in the pool and heard the sound of the water lapping softly against it, rocking her gently back and forth. She was holding Oskar's hand and thinking about the night before, when he had told her she was pretty -- well, actually, he had remarked about how pretty Eli was, and how that must mean that she was pretty too, but it meant the same thing, didn't it? "Yes, Hannah. It did," she heard Oskar whisper in her ear...It was a starry night, and the three of them were in the pool and Eli was showing her the magic world of black holes and quantum mechanics and she and Oskar had taken it all in, awe-stricken, and envious, and together thought about how lucky Eli was to be able to see such things. Then Oskar made fun of her fairy undies...Hannah smiled as she remembered how much fun that had been... She caught her breath as Eli, hovering motionless in the chilly night air, showed her the magical fairy city hidden beneath them, and the cascading lights, and the beautiful solar wind, then flew her to the green, where they sat together, hand-in-hand in her tree, across the street from her own beautiful home, she and her fairy princess. She could see Einstein watching them from the upstairs window as she laid her head on Eli's shoulder...She remembered the magical night when Eli's Papa gave her the beautiful fairy cup that had belonged to his only son and had been hand-made by his beloved wife, and she remembered his gentle kindness and understanding, and his love for her... They lay on their backs in the field, listening to the crickets, as Eli told her the ancient and mysterious Swedish names for all the constellations she knew so well, and their love for each other blossomed and grew with every word. And simultaneously, the darkness that was Den Sjätte, faded slowly away until it was a distant memory; a darkness that was completely eclipsed by the light and warmth being lavished on her by her best friends in the whole world.

'I love you, Oskar,' she thought, as the warmth enveloped her and lifted her up. 'I love you, Eli.' They smiled at her as the last tentacle of her fear dropped away, and she drifted off into the sweetest, most gentle sleep she had ever known.

Chapter 12: Karma

Eli yawned, stretched, and glanced over at Hannah, who was still sound asleep in Oskar's arms. She slipped out of bed, being careful not to wake them up. The longer Hannah could sleep, the better it would be for her, Oskar had told her. How Oskar could be so sure of this, she didn't know, but somehow, he knew.

She quickly dressed herself and peeked out into the hall. Oskar's door was open, but a quick peek verified that Jason was probably still downstairs asleep with his parents. Just to be safe, she closed her door anyway and headed down the stairs.

The whole house was quiet. She was sure everyone else was probably still in bed, even though it was almost noon, because she had heard them still working when she woke up briefly at 7:00AM. She stepped into the kitchen and started a pot of tea, then walked out onto the porch, where Jack was sound asleep on the couch next to the now-locked door to the back yard. For just a moment, he looked just like the boy across the street, who had so sweetly and innocently fallen madly in love with her so long ago. She kissed him on the forehead and pulled the blanket up around him.

She stepped back into the kitchen at the same time Henry, with an armload of newspapers, came in the front door. "Good morning, Eli. What's new?" He dropped the papers on the table and grinned at her. "I guess I'm in a better position to know what's new than you are, aren't I? And I have a hunch you'll be interested in this bit of news." He placed a copy of "The Guardian" in front of her. Right there on the front page, she saw the headline:

MAN FALLS TO HIS DEATH AT ST. PAUL'S

An unidentified, partially-clothed man apparently fell from the roof of St. Paul's to the marble steps below the main entrance early this morning and was pronounced dead on the scene by the medical examiner. It is yet to be determined whether it was a suicide or just an unfortunate accident. There were no witnesses to the fall, but the time of death was estimated to be sometime between 2:00 A.M. and 4:00A.M this morning. Police are still unsure how he gained access, since there are several locked doors between the public areas and access to the roof.

"Henry, do you think it was..."

"I thought the odds were low, until I saw this one. I don't normally give it the time of day, but this caught my eye." He shoved a copy of "News of the World" in front of her:

ICARUS DIES ON THE STEPS OF ST. PAULS' CATHEDRAL

The body of a half-naked man was discovered on the steps of St. Paul's this morning by a Priest, who, after notifying the police, was seen performing last rights over the body, several witnesses reported. Initial reports said the man had apparently jumped or was thrown off the roof of the cathedral, but an unnamed police source said the condition of the

body and the distance away from the building, indicated that he had fallen from a much greater height, and could not have fallen from the cathedral. The body, which struck the steps head first, was so badly damaged that facial identification was said to be impossible. First observers on the scene reported that the mysterious man had wings, but the police forensics specialist has since denied the claims. The original source of the story was an eye-witness to the event; a vagrant, who had been resting on the steps at 3:00AM. He claimed he saw a “...magnificent gossamer-winged creature fall out of the sky like a wounded bird and smash head-first onto the marble steps no more than 5 meters from where I was sitting.”

Is this merely the fantasy of a man who may have had a bit too much to drink? Or is it just another case of a police cover-up? Inquiring minds want to know. A more detailed description of this mysterious Unfortunate, including photographs of the body taken before the police arrived, will be featured in a special edition of the paper later today.

“Eli? What do you think the man saw? If he had wings, why did he fall?”

“If he saw anything, he saw the threads, Henry. You know, the ones that form before the wings fill in with blackness. They look kind of white and silky. And when he retracts his wings, they’re the last to go.” She remembered vividly her last pair of wings and realized that he had probably struck the ground just as the last vestiges of his vampirism were fading away.

Eli read it again. “Henry, is the special edition out yet? It’s almost noon....”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He smiled at her and handed her the special edition.

The first photo was a bit fuzzy, but they could just barely make out a vague, almost invisible outline on the steps between his body and his outstretched arms. The residue of his wings, perhaps? Subsequent, clearer photos showed nothing at all, but Eli recognized the pants immediately. “It’s him, Henry. I know it.” She sat down hard. *Can it finally be over?* She laid her head on the table. She felt like crying, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. The act of holding it back made her feelings more intense, and she immersed herself in them. She was relieved he was dead but she was frightened that two of them still knew where they lived; she was sorry that Hannah would now be going home, but was happy that she would now be safe with her family; she was sad that growing up was becoming so much more painful than she had expected; but at the same time her love for Oskar had changed into something more exciting and intense than she had ever imagined, in spite of Mama’s long talks with her. She had always hated change, because change had always meant loneliness, and moving away and starting all over again, but this, with the good and the bad all mixed up together, made her head swim. She simply couldn’t handle so much so fast.

Henry sat down beside her. “Eli, are you okay? Would you like me to get Elaine for you?”

“No thanks, Henry. You’ll do just fine.” She sat in his lap, put her arms around him, and closed her eyes.

Henry thought back to that day 14 years ago when Jack and Oskar had made fun of him, and Eli had angrily leaped to his defense, given them both a tongue-lashing, and then comforted him. He had never forgotten it. He put his arms around her and held her. *For as long as it takes*, he thought to himself

§

Rich lay next to Elaine, watching her sleep and thinking about how, in spite of her ‘immortality’ he had almost lost her in just a matter of seconds. All he could really be sure of was that she could never die of old age; something he already knew on an intellectual level, but it had been driven home by the cold, stark, reality of *Den Tredje*’s assault on her. He kissed her gently on the cheek.

“Rich? Is something wrong?” she sat up suddenly. Where is everyone? Is everyone safe?”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to wake you. You’re so beautiful, I just couldn’t resist.” He paused, “Elaine, I almost lost you yesterday. I can’t imagine what my life would be like without you.”

She smiled at him, then leaned over and kissed him gently, “I think Eli and Oskar would still keep you pretty busy, Rich; and speaking of Eli and Oskar, did you know that Oskar came in about 4:30 this morning?”

“What? Why?”

“He wanted my permission to go sleep with Eli. Jason had gone down to sleep with his parents.”

“Really! And did you give it?” But, of course, he already knew the answer.

“I said, ‘yes.’ And after he told me the real reason he wanted to go, I was certain I had made the right decision.” She told him about Oskar’s concern for Hannah, and what he was going to try to do.

“Interesting idea on Oskar’s part. Do you think it worked?”

“Why don’t we go find out?” Elaine got out of bed carefully and put on her robe. Together, with Rich’s arm around her to steady her, they went upstairs and peeked quietly into Eli’s room. Hannah and Oskar were still asleep with their arms around each other. “Well at least she slept. That’s half the battle,” she whispered.

Hannah’s eyes suddenly popped open. She smiled at them, “Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson.” She yawned and stretched. “I think Eli went downstairs earlier.” She reached up and touched Oskar’s cheek. “Oskar...did something to me last night. He and Eli were so sweet to me.” She kissed him on the forehead.

“Whatever it was, you deserved it,” Richard said softly. “I understand you saved my life. And here I was, thinking I was protecting you.” He smiled gently at her.

“I was so scared he was going to hurt you. I had to do something.”

“Spoken like a true fairy princess. I told you so, remember?”

She giggled, “I sure didn’t feel like one at the time.”

Oskar sighed, rolled over, spotted Mom and Dad and sat up in bed. “Mom! Dad! I...I ...”

“Relax, Oskar. It’s okay. Hannah has vouched for you.” Elaine winked at him. “Why don’t you two come on down for breakfast as soon as you’re completely awake? Give me about 20 minutes or so to get it ready.”

“Okay!” they said in unison.

“Are you sure you’re strong enough, Elaine?”

“Immortal, remember?” She grinned and put her arms around him. “But you can carry me down the stairs if you like.”

“Don’t think I couldn’t!”

“I never doubted it for a second.” She winked at Hannah and Oskar.

They closed the door quietly behind them, and arm-in-arm, went, carefully, down to the kitchen.

Hannah smiled at Oskar. “I love you, you know.” She said softly. “And...thank you.” She took his hand, and told him all over again, with embellishments.

He blushed. “You’re just like her, Hannah. You’re sweet and kind and...pretty. And when we have children, we’re going to name our first daughter Hannah. Then we’ll have a real “Hannah, Jr.” And she’ll be your daughter too, you know. Because...” he blushed again, “You know...”

“Oskar, you say the sweetest things! Are you sure you don’t have an identical twin brother lying around somewhere? Because if you do, he’s mine!”

He blushed yet again. “Hannah you keep saying things that...”

She abruptly hopped out of bed and headed for the dresser. “Oskar, get out of here! I have to change!” Her eyes twinkled.

“Okay, okay! I can take a hint!” he pretended to be irritated as he stomped toward the door.

She quickly intercepted him and kissed him on the cheek as he went by, “Are you absolutely sure you don’t have a twin brother, Oskar?”

“Darn you, Hannah! You got me again!” He turned red as he fled across the hall to his room.

Hannah stood there for a moment and watched him go. She sighed softly, took off her faded fairy pajamas, turned around once slowly in front of the full-length mirror examining herself carefully, remembering all those nights when she and Eli had done the same, marveling at how exactly alike they always looked. Then, she slowly put her clothes on, deep in thought, thinking about all the ‘what ifs’ that still seemed possible in her rapidly-shrinking world of fairies and white marble palaces.

§

When she finally arrived at the table, everyone else had already seen the newspapers. They were all talking and laughing, and didn’t notice as she slipped into her chair next to Eli. But Eli’s Papa stood up as soon as he spotted her. He immediately filled her fairy cup with tea and presented it to her. “And our last hero has finally arrived!” He raised his cup of tea and toasted her. “To my brave fairy princess, who, in total disregard for her own life, saved mine. Eli’s Mama will forever be indebted to you, Hannah!” Everyone laughed and applauded noisily. Hannah blushed and grabbed Eli’s hand. “Eli, I didn’t...”

“Yes, you did, Hannah. You did more than any of us, because it was so much harder for you, and yet you still did it,” she whispered. “And you saved my Papa’s life.”

Richard turned to Livia and Nils, “You both should be proud of your children. As adults, we try our best to protect them from life’s hardships, yet at the same time, try to instill in them what’s important in life and what in life is worth fighting for. And look at the results! Two magnificent children, who both came through when the chips were down, and are already well on their way toward becoming decent, responsible adults.”

Even Jason blushed as everyone applauded again.

“Look, Hannah!” Oskar pushed the newspapers in front of her. “*Den Tredje* is dead! The others have run away for good! It’s over!”

“And *Den Sjätte*? Do you think he’ll ever...”

“No Hannah.” Eli’s Papa said softly. “He’s really gone. He’ll never come back.”

She smiled at him, gratefully. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes, Hannah, I do,” he said firmly.

There was relative silence around the table as they all dug into the very late breakfast Elaine and Nils had prepared. Eli, remembering her promise to Einstein, made sure there were plenty of bangers on her plate and at the proper time, slipped them under the table to him, a piece at a time. She could feel his tail gratefully wagging against her leg with each gift she gave him. She

hadn't even noticed that Hannah was doing the same thing, and Einstein, wise beyond his years, saw fit to not draw attention to the fact.

"Richard, how did you know so quickly that the policeman was a fake?" Nils asked.

"Elaine recognized him immediately, but I knew that Jack's and Henry's mother wasn't home, and hadn't been there since this whole thing began. No one was at home, so no one there could have called the police." He turned to Henry. "Did they do any damage, Henry? Is the house okay?"

"Everything's fine, Dr. Dawson. They broke a pane out of the back door, but everything else is okay. I've already scheduled a complete lock change before Mom comes home."

"Well, haven't we been busy today. Did you get any sleep at all?" Jack ribbed him.

"Nope! Didn't want to miss anything." He smiled at Eli. "And it gave Eli and me a chance to get caught up."

Hannah gave Jason a dirty look when she noticed he was staring a bit too often at Eli and Oskar. When that didn't work, she kicked him in the shin.

"What was that for?" he hissed.

"For what you were thinking about. Grow up!" She couldn't believe she had actually said that, but it had worked, so she must have been right. Jason turned red and looked as guilty as hell.

"Nils, my first thought was to tell you all that this was over, and you could finally go home safely today, but after giving it a lot of thought, perhaps it would be better if you stayed at least one more day."

"What? Why? What are you worried about, Richard." Livia asked.

"I think Eli, Oskar, and I need to visit the vault one last time before we end this. *Den Tredje* was on his way back there, which means they must have left many things behind. He certainly hadn't anticipated his own death. We need to remove anything that could be found there later, which could connect us in any way to the vault. It does have a dark history, you know."

"I'm going with you, Rich." Elaine said firmly.

"No. You're not! You're not fully recovered and I don't want to have to worry about you, and that's final!"

"Okay, okay. You win! I'll stay here, wash dishes, scrub the floors, and do all those things that obedient housewives are supposed to do, while their husbands go out and do all the important stuff."

“Sorry, Elaine. That’s not going to work on me. You’re staying home.”

She shrugged her shoulders and winked at Eli. “I tried, Butterfly, but he’s just too smart for me. He’s such a *mensch* ” she gave him a quick hug.

“I’d like to go too, if I may,” Jack said.

“Of course, Jack. You’re welcome to come. I have already replaced the batteries in the Elilights, so we’ll each take one of those with us, too. A larger one is in the boot, just in case, since we have to go at night. We’ve packed extra batteries, just in case. Everyone relax until it gets dark.”

“Why do we need so many batteries, Papa?”

“The Elilights draw so much power that even high-capacity cells will deplete in about 10 minutes of continuous use, Eli. We’re just lucky we were able to get them all out of here so quickly. And, frankly, I had no idea the small ones would work so well. I expected them to hurt a bit and slow them down, but not seriously injure them. The big ones were for that.”

“It was all your research on Eli, Dr. Dawson. You spent years working out the characteristics of her vampirism. By the time you designed the Elilight, you knew the exact range of frequencies, and their respective relative intensities, that set off the chain-reaction in their skin cells. I actually was not surprised they worked so well,” Henry said.

“Well, Henry, you had more faith than I did. However, I’m quite happy that your assessment was correct. It makes things much easier for us in the event...”

“Be quiet, Rich,” Elaine whispered. She nodded at Hannah, who thankfully, was engaged in slipping the last of her bangers to Einstein and hadn’t heard.

“Papa? Can Hannah come?”

“I don’t know, Eli. It would be fine with me, but, you’ll have to ask Nils and Livia.”

“Please, Mr Sandstrøm, after all she’s been through, could she please come?” Oskar pleaded. “She did save Dad’s life, after all. And there’s no danger; just ask Dad. And I just know she wants to see the very spot where Mom and Dad first met...”

“Okay, Oskar, Okay. Hannah would you like to go too?”

She couldn’t believe her ears, “Yes Dad! Can I really?!” she gave Oskar a grateful smile.

“Then it’s settled.” Livia smiled at her. “Jack? Would you mind kind of chaperoning her for us? Richard, Eli, and Oskar really don’t need the distraction while they’re working.

“Of course, Livia. Is that all right with you Hannah?” He winked at her.

“Sure, Mr. Shaw.” She smiled at him.

“Jack, Hannah. Just call me Jack. Eli and Oskar have called me Jack now for 14 years.”

“Okay...Jack,” *He’s so nice*. She thought back to all the fun stories Oskar and Eli had told her about him when he was their age so many years ago. *And look at him now*, she thought. *A real scientist, just like Dr. Dawson*. Ever since they had been home-schooled by Eli’s papa, Hannah’s latent interest in science had been reawakened with a vengeance; especially once she had fully realized that everything Eli was today, was a result of science. She had already decided she wanted to be one when she grew up; she just hadn’t picked her ‘field of study’ yet. Dr. Dawson had told her she had plenty of time to think about it and that there was no hurry, and he hadn’t been condescending at all to her. And Jack was the same. He had always treated her with respect; not like adults usually treated 13-year-old girls. But then, he had grown up with Eli...maybe that was why. She smiled to herself as she remembered how cute he had looked when he was Eli’s age. It was no wonder that Oskar had been a bit jealous. And even now, he was really handsome.

“What should I wear, Jack?” she blurted out. *Why on earth am I asking him?!* She was suddenly embarrassed.

He smiled at her. “Eli told me you wore the perfect outfit the last time you visited the tomb. Why don’t you go with that? A bit of *déjà vu* if you like. Also, it could be a bit chilly, and most likely, dirty down there. You might want to bring an old jacket or sweater you don’t mind getting grubby in.”

“That would be perfect, Hannah! Thanks, Jack.” Eli grabbed Hannah’s hand and they went up to her room together to pick out their clothes.

§

No one felt much like doing anything the rest of the day. Even Henry finally succumbed to his exhaustion and, at Livia’s insistence, fell asleep quickly on their bed. Hannah and her family watched television in the living room, and Jack and Dr. Dawson relaxed on the porch with books, where Rich could keep his eye on Elaine, who had immediately fallen asleep again on the porch couch.

Eli and Oskar finally retreated to his room, where Oskar plopped down at his table, and tried again to solve the 4-square Rubik’s Cube. He had done it a few times before, but had chalked it up to luck, because he could never quite figure out how he had done it.

“Want me to show you, Oskar?” she sat down across from him.

“Nah! I want to do it myself.” He grinned at her. “But you can give me a hint if you like.”

“Are you sure, Oskar?” I wouldn’t want to spoil your fun,” she teased.

“Just give me the hint, Eli.” *Sometimes she’s just so...smug*, he thought, a bit irritated with her.

She took his hand in hers and...*Smug?! I'll show you!!* So she did. She visualized for him the basic pattern of moves that was required to solve the 4-square. And she really gave it to him. She thrust it into his mind so clearly that it would be impossible for him to forget now. If there was one thing she knew about Oskar, it was that he never, ever, forgot something if it were logical.

He jerked his hand away, but it was too late. "Eli! Why did you do that? Now I'll never be able to say I solved it myself! I just wanted a clue, not the solution!" He was actually surprised that he was so angry.

"Well, next time don't tell me I'm smug, just because I'm smarter than you." She was already sorry she had done it, but it couldn't be helped now.

That stung, even though he had always known it was true. It was one of the lesser things that drew him to her in the first place; the notion that someone so smart would still like him. On the other hand, he just simply loved the fact that she was so smart.

"Well, if you're so smart, how come you have a dummy for a boyfriend? It looks to me like I was smart enough to make the better choice!"

Eli's jaw dropped, as she realized she had just been snookered. "I...I just felt sorry for you Oskar. I had so many other choices at the time, but wanting to take care of a dummy has always been my weakness." She threw her head back haughtily, got up from the table and walked away.

Wherever she was going, she never made it. Oskar was on her almost instantly. He grabbed her around the waist, lifted her off the ground, spun her around and threw her on his bed. He was on top of her tickling her before she could even catch her breath. "Take that back!"

She twisted and bucked, to no avail. Oskar had grown ten centimeters since they had begun aging, and she had only grown seven. And he really outweighed her now. "Oskar..." she giggled in spite of herself.

"Say 'uncle.' Or else..." he tickled her even harder, then lifted up her shirt and blew on her stomach. She jerked hard, then taking a page from Hannah's playbook, jammed her thumbs beneath his ribcage. Unfortunately for Eli, his thick wool sweater took the brunt of the attack, and he didn't miss the opportunity to blast her again in the stomach. It had worked so well on Hannah, he was certain it would work on Eli. And, of course, it did.

"Oskar, please, don't!!" She jerked hard, kicked the wall, twisted back and forth to no avail, as Oskar prepared for the *coup de grâce*. He pulled her shirt over her head and blew on her stomach at the same time he tickled her around the neck. She screamed, then wrapped her arm around his neck tightly and squeezed hard. Her face was right up against his now and all he could see was her gritting teeth and an extremely determined look on her face. He simply couldn't resist; he gave her a big wet kiss. She was taken completely by surprise and loosened her grip on him just enough for him to wriggle free. He used the opportunity to take a deep breath and nail her again right over her belly button. She jerked hard and almost bucked him off, but he successfully

straddled her again. He grabbed her hands and, in a duel of upper-arm strength, fought to press her hands back against the bed, but this time, he was losing the battle. She grinned at him as she realized she was getting the upper hand, when...Her head began spinning and she felt a searing pain in her groin as her muscles suddenly cramped up “Oskar, please...” she felt suddenly, unaccountably, afraid. And Oskar looked...different somehow; not Oskar at all. She let go of him and pressed her hand between her legs. *It hurts!* She cramped up again, and then again. It hurt so much her back arched. She pulled her hand away, and gasped when she saw it was covered with blood.

She turned her head away from him, jerked hard, almost throwing him off, then hissed at him. Her whole body began shaking and her eyes turned golden. Oskar sat up, startled. “Eli! What’s wrong?”

“Ernst! What are you doing?!” She gagged, then threw up all over herself. “Get off! Get off! Ernst, please don’t...” she struggled against him, still trembling.

His first instinct was to hold on to her because she was thrashing about so hard, he was afraid she’d hurt herself. But when he felt her fear and revulsion, he jumped out of bed and backed away quickly. He gasped as he saw that her groin area was covered with blood, then looked at himself and saw that the front of his sweater and pants also had blood on them. She scrambled out of bed, hacking and coughing, crawled across the floor on all fours, then stumbled to her feet and pressed her back against the wall next to his table, eyes closed. He moved toward her, but she slid along the wall away from him and hissed at him again. Frightened, he backed toward the door. *I’ll get mom. She’ll know what to do.* He flung open the door and bounded down the stairs.

Eli slowly slumped to the floor and rolled over on her back, staring up at the ceiling, then slowly curled up into a ball. *She put her arm lovingly around her doll with its one remaining button eye, and closed her eyes. As she was sucked into the darkness, she saw once again, but only for a fleeting moment, that beautiful blond-haired boy smiling, beckoning to her --- “Come!” he said excitedly. “Come!” He turned and ran as though he hadn’t a care in the world, confident that she would follow close behind him. That she would always be close behind him...*

Eli! Elias! Wake up! Please wake up! She heard him sobbing.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?” *She reached up and touched his face, his beautiful face. “I’m coming!” she cried out, “ Please, please wait...”* Her eyes opened suddenly, and ...there he was! And she knew his name! Oskar! *I’m coming! Don’t leave without me. Please...* She struggled to get up.

Elaine helped her to her feet. “Come with me, Butterfly,” she said gently. “Oskar? Warm up the shower please.”

“Is she going to be okay, Mom? When she ...bled, she had a nightmare while she was still awake. Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine, Oskar. Now, please go start the shower.”

He briefly took Eli's hand. *I love you Eli.*

She smiled at him, "Did I ever tell you how much I like your hair?" She whispered. "I...I've liked it for over 100 years." She stumbled, and Mama quickly picked her up in her arms. Oskar rushed into the bathroom and turned on the water.

§

Oskar paced back and forth. Mom had made him leave while she helped Eli clean herself up. He knew it was because the Sandstrøms might not understand their relationship yet, but it irritated him anyway. He sat down and leaned up against the bathroom door.

He almost lost his balance when the door suddenly opened. Elaine grinned at him, patted him on the head, and headed down the stairs.

Eli smiled at him. "Oskar! I almost tripped over you! What are you doing down there?"

He jumped up and put his arms around her. "I was waiting for you! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Oskar! It was just..."

"I know, Eli. I read the books too. I'm talking about the other thing...Ernst?"

"I'm sorry Oskar. Let's go in your room." She took his hand gently and they sat down on his bed. He had already cleaned himself up and he was already thinking of the whole thing as just a bad dream, when she took his hands and...

§§

When she finished, he was crying; he couldn't help it. "Oh, Eli! How terrible that must have been for you! But...you saw me? Me? Are you sure?"

She smiled at him. "I'm sure, Oskar. The amazing thing is, even Gudmund couldn't see that far ahead. Why could I? I saw you – twice. And I knew you loved me even then, although I wasn't even sure you were real. But the odd thing is, I didn't remember, until just today." She pressed her cheek against his, then kissed him.

"Are you okay, Eli? I mean...does it still hurt?" he asked softly. "Can I get you anything?" He put his blanket around her shoulders.

She smiled, then pulled him down on the bed and wrapped him up in the blanket with her.

Eli ran her fingers gently through his hair over and over again, stopping every now and then only to nuzzle up against his neck and smell his sweetness. They lay together like that, talking softly to one another until well after the sun went down.

Chapter 13: The Breakthrough, or Pseudo-Science in the Sepulcher

Richard turned the lights out and pulled over by the gate, waiting until the last car passed out of sight around the corner. He quickly turned and pulled in past the gate and, with Eli's help in the darkness, followed the service road around the hill until finally, they pulled up in front of Dr. Llewellyn's ornate, but weathered head stone.

He put his fingers to his lips as they all got out and got their gear together. "Oskar? Do you hear anything?"

"No, Dad. There's no one there. I'm positive."

"Good! Let's go then." He started up the hill. The others followed closely behind him, holding hands in the darkness so they wouldn't attract undue attention with their lamps. When they arrived at the tomb, Papa and Jack carefully rolled the stone away and opened the hatch. Eli entered first to make sure everything was as it should be. Oskar had already told her that they had re-opened this entrance soon after they had temporarily moved away, so there shouldn't be any surprises, but with her eyes, she would be able to make sure.

Hannah held Jack's hand tightly as they waited outside. He squeezed it reassuringly. "Are you sure you want to do this, Hannah? We can always wait out here until they're done."

"I got so close last time...Jack." She smiled at him. "I could even see the beautiful rose door! I couldn't bear not going the rest of the way." She paused a moment, trying to find the right words to express the wonderful idea that had been forming in the back of her mind ever since she had whispered it to Eli in the car. "Jack, would it be possible for us to...I mean for Eli and me to...bring the rose door back to Eli's Mama? I've wondered a lot why she never thought to take it herself, but I bet she would really like to have it. Or do you think it brings back terrible memories for her?" she said anxiously. "Maybe that's why she never took it."

"Hannah, I think that's a wonderful idea! And don't worry about terrible memories. I just think she's overlooked it." He remembered the story about Elaine's accidental killing of an innocent and how she had ended up on the Dawson's doorstep. The only other time she had been back to the vault at all after that was when she retrieved her tools and material from the vault a few days later. The door was probably the last thing on her mind at that time. "I'll tell you what: While the others are going through the stuff left behind, you and I will remove the door and get it ready. There's rope in the boot and a rack on top of Elaine's car, so we should be set."

"Oh yes! I think that's a great idea, Jack!" she gave him a quick hug. He put his fingers to his lips, "Shh. It's our secret for now, Hannah. We'll wait until they're gathering up...whatever they're gathering up, then we'll surprise them."

Eli popped her head out, "All clear! Come on Hannah; Oskar; let's go!" Her head vanished as quickly as it had appeared. One by one they followed her into the darkness, Jack bringing up the rear.

Papa and Jack made short work of the slab, lifting it out with the crowbar as Hannah had done, but Jack pushed from the stairway while Papa pulled from the other end, resulting in the slab moving silently and fluidly across the floor, revealing the dark corridor and marble stairway to the vault. There were no signs of fire anywhere. The Four had restored everything perfectly.

“Hannah? After you,” Jack bowed and motioned her to the front of the line.

“No! I mean...after you, Jack. Please. I’m still...” she blushed. Eli took her by the hand.

“We’ll both follow Jack, Hannah.” Eli gathered up her things, and handed Hannah her backpack.

Jack winked at Hannah as they descended the stairs, “Well, Hannah, at least you can open this beautiful door.” He flipped the switch on the wall as she timidly opened the door a crack. The hallway was immediately bathed in the powerful lights *Den Andra* had installed for Elaine. Jack stepped past her down the steps, walked decisively across the checkered floor, and sat down in Elaine’s chair. “This is where Eli’s Papa first saw Elaine, Hannah. And the rest is history.”

“How did you know, Jack? You haven’t been here before either.” She suddenly realized how. “You...you touch-talked with Eli a long time ago, didn’t you? I had forgotten.”

“Touch-talked? What an excellent way of putting it, Hannah. I like it!” Hannah blushed again.

“She thought it up all by herself, Jack. And now, we all call it that. It sounds ever so much nicer than ‘mind reading.’” Eli said, excitedly.

“Well, Eli. You touch-talked with Elaine long before you descended back down the ladder of evolution a couple of steps and became human again,” he kidded. “When did your Mama and Papa first fall in love? And please, no comments from you, Doctor.” He grinned at Dawson. “I want the truth from an impartial witness.”

“As you wish, Jack. But I would hardly call Eli ‘impartial.’” Papa put his arm around her and kissed her on top of the head.

“It was right after one of their fights, Jack. And Papa proposed to Mama out by the pool.”

“But, surely they already knew they loved each other at that point, or else why would your papa take the chance?” Jack goaded her.

“Papa always takes chances, Jack. He’s Papa! But Mama didn’t realize she loved Papa so much until that very moment. She told me so.”

“What changed her mind, Eli?” Jack winked at Dawson.

“I... I don’t really know, Jack.” She looked down, guiltily.

“Come now, Eli. You could really touch-talk with her by yourself back then. No clues at all? You never peeked?”

I think she...I mean...she saw herself for the first time the way Papa saw her. That’s the way it looked to me, anyway.”

“You little Imp! You mean you were watching us when you should have been asleep?” Papa squeezed her shoulder.

Eli blushed, “I...I’m sorry Papa. But I knew you loved each other long before that. I watched you a lot when you weren’t looking. Every time I touched you, I could tell! But I didn’t dare say anything; It would have ruined everything. So I just...waited and watched – and hoped.”

Jack laughed. “Hannah, you be careful. If Eli ever gets it into her head that you need a boyfriend, you’re doomed!”

Hannah stole a quick look at Oskar, then turned bright red. “I...I don’t think...I don’t want...”

“Boy, you really got her, Jack!” Oskar laughed gleefully.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I honestly didn’t mean to embarrass you. I apologize!” He gently put his arm around her.

“That’s okay, Jack. I know you didn’t do it on purpose.” *He’s so, so nice.*

“Well! Enough of that! What would you like us to do, Dr. Dawson? How can we help?”

“Well, Jack, if you and Hannah could explore a bit to see if they’ve left anything in the tunnel or cells, Eli, Oskar, and I will go through everything on the conference table.”

“Okay, Doctor. Hannah? Let’s go.”

Papa rubbed his hands together as he surveyed all the books and papers on the huge table. “Come on you two, we’ve got a lot of work to do.” He handed each of them a large backpack and began examining the material, sorting it, and stacking it carefully on the other end of the table.

“Hannah, look! It’s your dad’s lantern!” she snatched it up and put it in Hannah’s backpack.

“And the screwdriver and crowbar! And your flashlight!” she waved it at her.

“Dad will be happy to see those, Eli. Thanks.” But it made Hannah’s skin crawl to think that They had touched and handled it all. She put her backpack on the chair, and hurried after Jack, who had already headed back for the other end of the vault.

§

“Hold the door like this, Hannah, while I...” With his screwdriver and small hammer, he carefully pounded the pins out of the hinges one by one, until Hannah could tell that it was completely loose. She carefully leaned the heavy door against the wall as Jack unscrewed the hinge-halves from the door frame and slipped them into his backpack. “I wasn’t going to bother with these, but they seem to be solid brass and quite ornate. If Elaine wants to toss them later, she can, but I don’t want to take any chances.” He carefully removed the heavy brass strike plate from the frame and slipped it in his backpack along with the hinges.

“How are we going to get it out of the vault, Jack? It won’t fit through the hole in the tomb, and the other entrance is a long way away and too close to the street. People could see us.”

“Ah! You think that’s a problem then, do you? Come, Hannah. You touch-talked with Eli, and through her, Elaine. How did they get all that marble down here? And all the wood paneling for this beautiful hallway?”

“The doors at the end of the tomb! Of course!” she grinned at him. “But the key! We don’t have the key!”

“But Eli knows where it is, Hannah. She just doesn’t realize it. Remember the pictures she took of the electrical cabinet just next to this very door in the vault?” He pulled a photo out of his backpack and handed it to her. The photo clearly showed the open cabinet door, and the buried cable that *Den Andra* had spliced into to provide power for the vault. A few small tools lay in the bottom of the cabinet, but she could see nothing else. She looked up at him questioningly.

“Look more carefully, Hannah.”

And there, hanging on the inside of the cabinet door on a small brass hook, was a heavy brass key. Excited, she quickly stepped down into the vault, opened the cabinet, and pulled the key off its hook, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re so smart, Jack. How did you ever notice it?”

“Actually, it happened back when I was your age, Hannah. Eli, unbeknownst to Henry and me, had hibernated, but we thought she had gone to visit relatives in Sweden. Once, when I was in Oskar’s room waiting for him, I spotted a photo album on his table and looked at a few of the pictures. Of course, I didn’t know anything about the vault in those days, but I spotted the key right away in this very photo; perhaps because I had been reading the ‘Lord of the Rings’ trilogy and my mind was full of magical things. At any rate, I never forgot it.”

“You liked the ‘Lord of the Rings?!’ That’s always been one of my favorites!” she grinned at him. “Can I go try out the key?”

“First, help me get the door up the stairs, Hannah.” He hid a smile; he loved her enthusiasm and inquisitiveness. *Just like Eli*, he thought to himself. He carefully balanced the door so he had the bulk of the weight, and let Hannah guide her end up the stairs into the tomb. They gently rested it against the wall, and Hannah rushed over and tried the key in the tomb doors. It turned easily, and they both heard the bolt slide back smoothly. She flashed him an impish grin and folded her

arms across her chest as though to say, *See? We figured this out together!* He smiled to himself and decided to let her have this one.

They left the door where it was for the time being and went back into the vault, just in time to hear Eli's angry voice. "But Papa! It can't be! Gudmund never would have been a part of this!"

"I'm sorry, Eli. I didn't want you to see this, but by the time I realized the implications, it was too late."

"What is it? What's wrong, Eli?" Hannah ran up and sat down beside her.

Gudmund was...he was... *Den Sjunde*."

"What's that, Eli?" Hannah didn't understand.

"The Seventh, Hannah! He was the seventh of these...things."

"I don't think so, Eli." Papa said as he examined the old parchment. "His signature is here on the original document, but there's no other record of him anywhere. In all the logs of their meetings, all their plans after the death of *Den Första* and the destruction of his estate, there's no mention of him again. It's as though he didn't exist to them. His position in the group, *De Sju*, was never mentioned again either."

"But Papa, how could he have signed it? How could he have even thought about it?"

"I don't know for sure Eli, but put yourself in his place. *Den Första* was his father. He had just become an unwilling vampire himself, and the whole bloody spectacle had been witnessed by his wife, whose life had also been threatened by his father – and worse; the life of his unborn child. He may have felt he had no choice." He thought about it a moment. "In fact, Eli, this may have been a part of the catalyst that drove him to kill his own father."

"But how can we know, Papa? I have to know!" The very idea that this dark, mysterious man, who had spent 150 years protecting her from harm could have an even darker side, bothered her terribly; especially since, after her memories of Ernst had flooded back to her earlier today, she had frantically gone through Gudmund's old albums once again, and found pictures of him bathing and dressing her in the old abandoned wine cellar annex – pictures she hadn't understood until those memories had returned so suddenly.

"Eli, I'll keep looking, but don't be disappointed if we can't find anything. Unfortunately, life is full of unanswered questions and loose ends."

"I know, Papa. It's just that..." she felt miserable just thinking about it. She sighed heavily, then reached down and began leafing through another box.

"Should I...take her with us?" Jack whispered.

Dawson shook his head. “Thanks, Jack, but I think I’d better keep my eye on her here.”

“Hannah? Shall we?” He held out his hand.

Reluctantly, Hannah got up and followed Jack toward the arched door. “What do you think, Jack? Was Gudmund really one of them?”

“What do you think Hannah?”

“I...I don’t think so. If it was just Eli he took care of, maybe. He might have done that just for family honor or something, even though it didn’t seem that way to me. But anyone who could do all the extra things he did, like adopt a son who became a really nice man, and make Archaeogenetics and help all the people he helped, like my own mom and dad so they could have me, all the while being a vampire, so he had to do it all at night, couldn’t be one of them.”

“I agree with you completely, Hannah. Your reasoning is logical, intuitive, and from the heart. I arrived at the same conclusion, and for the same reasons. You make sure you tell Eli what you think. She really loves and respects you, you know. Your opinion carries a lot of weight with her.”

“I will, Jack. I promise.”

Jack stopped in front of the arched door. “You can stay out here if you wish, Hannah. I can do this one alone. I know this is where they kept your brother.”

No, Jack. I...think I should see this for myself.” She hesitated a moment. “But, could I use an Elilight when we go in? Would that be okay?”

He smiled at her and handed her his Elilight. “Of course, Hannah.” He opened the door and stepped in as she pressed the button. The room was instantly flooded with sunlight. Hannah gasped as they both heard a sound like popcorn popping, accompanied by little puffs of smoke erupting from the floor and walls wherever the beam of her light touched them. She quickly released the button and stumbled back out of the room, shaking.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“I’m not sure, Hannah. Let me have the light for a moment.”

He aimed it at the floor and pressed the button for a second. Several small puffs of smoke erupted on the floor like tiny volcanoes, accompanied by the now-familiar popping sound. He aimed it at the ceiling and pressed it again. Nothing happened.

“What on earth are you two doing over there, Jack?” Dawson stood up and peered over Oskar’s head.

“Don’t mind us, Doctor. We’re just ... enjoying ourselves.” Jack grinned at Hannah.

“But Jack! What is it? I’m... scared. Is it dangerous?”

He put his hands on her shoulders, reassuringly. “Well, Hannah, let’s think this out. What’s different about the Elilight over a regular flashlight?”

“It’s the same as the sun, isn’t it?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. The combination of light frequencies present in the beam contains exactly – let me repeat that – exactly the combination and intensities of light frequencies that trigger the chain-reaction in a vampire’s skin that causes them to burn.”

“But...what...” It suddenly dawned on her. “The sun has never ever shown down here, has it? That means...” her head was spinning, but she had to get this exactly right; after all she was talking to a real scientist, and she really wanted to get it right. “Eli’s papa told me the story of Eli’s skin cell samples catching on fire when he accidentally set them on a window ledge once.” She paused, “This place has had vampires in it for hundreds of years, maybe. I remember reading somewhere that there are harmless microscopic-sized dust mites that live in everyone’s house that eat old dead skin cells that people loose every day without knowing it.” She shuddered as she thought about it, remembering how disgusted she had felt when she had read the article.



Hannah’s ‘dust mites’

Jack grinned at her, arms folded across his chest. He was enjoying this immensely. He could almost see the gears grinding in her head. *‘I’ll stop her when smoke starts coming out of her ears, but until then...*

“Could there be millions of old vampire skin cells just laying around in here?” She quickly took her hand off the wall, brushed it off on her shorts, and shuddered again.

“Brilliant! Hannah, you’ve outdone yourself!”

“But...aren’t vampires immortal? Doesn’t that mean their skin cells are immortal too? Why would they lose them?”

“Excellent question, Hannah.” He was definitely impressed. “Actually, vampires aren’t immortal; they’re just very strong, and heal quickly. Also, they don’t age, just like Eli’s mama and papa. Shedding skin cells is a natural process, so there’s no reason to think that ‘immortals’ wouldn’t do it also. In fact,” he swung the beam of the Elilight across the floor once more, to the accompaniment of more tiny puffs of smoke and tiny popping sounds, “the proof is right here.” He suddenly realized the significance of this ‘discovery.’ Of course, they knew Eli shed skin cells as a vampire; that had been established long ago by Dr. Dawson. But these dead skin cells still, after all these years, perhaps centuries, had a fair amount of very stable energy stored up in them. Clearly, individual skin cells weren’t causing this; it was definitely clumps of them, bonded together by all the moisture in the vault condensing, then drying out, due to minor temperature changes and relatively high humidity; sort of like organic dust bunnies. Yet still, after all that exposure to moisture, they were still stable. And apparently still contained viable amounts of the robust faction of the neural pathways he and Doctor Dawson had discovered. It was the only explanation. The more fragile neural network began deteriorating within hours of Eli’s or Elaine’s skin cell removal. The fact that the energy was released in spite of its absence, strongly indicated that the robust network was solely responsible for the energy control.

“Jack? Are you okay?” Hannah anxiously slipped her arm through his.

He got a big grin on his face. “Dust bunnies!”

She cocked her head. “What?”

“Vampire dust bunnies, Hannah. You’ve discovered vampire dust bunnies.” He grabbed her around the waist and spun her around. “You’re a genius, Hannah.” He dragged her over to the table, plopped her down next to Eli, grabbed a notebook out of his backpack and began writing. “Doctor, I think Hannah may have inadvertently solved the energy manipulation problem, the major obstacle between Eli and her wings!”

To this day, he still used his fond memories of Eli the night she revealed her secret and her wings to Henry and him, as his motivation to understand the process by which her cells were able to make and utilize all that energy to accelerate tissue growth. And the answer had been right under his nose all the time. Of course it wasn’t the dust bunnies themselves; it was the process by which the cells shared their energy with each other to produce sustainability; sort of like the difference between a charge of static electricity and a battery. Each “Dust Bunny” probably contained thousands of cells, all in more or less perfect contact with one another, just like the individual cells in the fabric of Eli’s wings, the fullerene C60 molecule. The individual vampire skin cell’s unique geometry, basically a truncated icosahedron, exactly like the C60 molecule, made this connection between them, even in these degraded cells, almost a perfect fit, like pieces in a three-dimensional puzzle. And enough of the now-dead neural synapses’ conductors, present in each skin cell, were intact to propagate the chain reaction from cell to cell, resulting in the ‘pop’ each time a network, or ‘dust bunny’ was exposed to light, and fired spontaneously. That meant there were two distinctly different pathways in each cell; one to coordinate and control the

energy—a simpler, heavier duty set of synapses—and the other, a finer, far more fragile and complex set, with a direct connection to the brain, to coordinate the movement of organic material from cell to cell to manufacture, according to ancient, primeval blueprints embedded in the vampire DNA, all the organic structures necessary for a vampire to grow its wings, fangs, claws, or in some special cases, with limitations, things made wholly from imagination, like Elaine’s marble-working claws, or the extra sensitivity range of her eyes. Eli had been exactly correct in saying that she could ‘think’ her fangs sharp, or ‘think’ her wings larger than normal. The neural network in her vampire body was an extension of her brain, which also explained why Håkan had been so hard to destroy, once he was dead and the primal instincts of his primitive extended brain took over. *Kind of like groups of mindless, yet primitively-coordinated ‘dust bunnies.’* The brain-over-the-heart idea was an erroneous assumption, disproven dramatically by Eli’s unsuccessful attempt to destroy it when Håkan attacked her.

Jack excitedly explained all this to Dawson, as the children’s eyes slowly glazed over. Even Hannah, as hard as she tried to keep up, was finally lost, although still in complete awe as Jack thundered on, passionately. “Doctor, because we can finally understand the difference in functionality between the two neural networks, we can at last undertake the studies necessary to reestablish the complex network, once we figure out how to make the ‘dust bunny’ neural synapses sunlight-neutral.” He impulsively grabbed both girls and kissed them on the cheeks. “Perhaps someday soon, you’ll both be flying together again!”

Poor Hannah, completely swept up in Jack’s energy and enthusiasm, was now hopelessly in love. Her world of white marble palaces, fairies, and now, handsome princes was on the mend.

§

“You and Jack did this?” Eli stood in the tomb, eyes wide open, staring at Mama’s beautiful door. “Mama is going to love this, Hannah. And it was all your idea! I never even thought...”

“None of us did, Eli,” Papa said, “Perhaps we were all too close to it; I’m not sure. But leave it to Hannah to set us all straight.”

They loaded up the car, carefully strapped the door to the rack, and drove home, exhausted, but happy. As usual, Oskar sat between Eli and Hannah, with his head resting on Eli’s shoulder, his hands in theirs, and they touch-talked to each other until Oskar finally drifted off somewhere in downtown London.

Chapter 14: Decisions

“What do you think, Henry? Do you have any reservations?” Jack asked.

“Well, actually, yes I do. As you know, I’ve been seeing someone for several months now. If I do this now, I’ll stop aging. But she won’t. In fact, looking at this realistically, once it’s done, carrying on a relationship with anyone for any significant length of time afterwards would be almost impossible, at least at my age. At my age, five years still makes a difference. If I were to follow Mom’s advice and not get married until I’ve known the poor girl for at least five years, she’d be too old for me by then. I’d have to start dating girls Eli’s age to fulfill Mom’s requirements.” He winked at her.

Jack laughed. “Good point, Henry. The last thing you want to do is cross Mom. As for myself, being unattached and unlikely, with my disposition, to become attached anytime soon, I have absolutely no problem with it.”

“What’s wrong with your disposition? I like your disposition.” Hannah rose to his defense.

“You don’t know him like I do, Hannah. He’s right. When he latches on to a new idea, he forgets everything else. He forgets to eat, he forgets to sleep, and most importantly, he forgets to bathe. If it’s a really good idea, he can get pretty ripe.” The twinkle in his eye went unnoticed by Hannah.

Her eyes blazed. “He’s not like that at all! He...”

Henry roared with laughter. “Jack, you’ve got a real advocate here! I’ll have to be more careful what I say when Hannah’s around.”

She turned beet-red. “I didn’t...I mean...”

Jack put his arm around her. “Well I, for one, appreciate the support, Hannah. Ignore him. He’s just jealous because you solved the energy manipulation problem.”

“But Jack, I didn’t! You did!”

“But you were the catalyst, Hannah. I couldn’t have done it without you and the dust bunnies.” He smiled at her. “You’re going to make a great scientist someday. You think like one already. You and Eli are more alike than I ever imagined! You both love solving puzzles. I just hope you’re not as good a swimmer as she is.”

Hannah was in seventh heaven. Not only had Jack come to her defense, he had paid her a real compliment. *A real scientist! And he’s right. I’m going to be a good one. I just know it!*

“So! Let’s get back on track; Henry, are you saying that you’d rather wait?” Dawson asked.

“I know we’ve talked about this before, Doctor, but I confess; I hadn’t given it much thought until Elaine...” he paused.

“Almost died?” Elaine finished for him.

“Bingo.”

“Henry, you do realize that you won’t stop maturing intellectually when you get the shot, don’t you? Your brain is fully matured already. Jenna won’t pass you by.”

“I do know that, Doctor. I’m actually just stalling; trying to understand all the consequences of such a step. For example, what if I do this now? Then, what if I decide that Jenna is my true love, and we marry. At what point do I tell her I’m immortal? Before or after the wedding? What if we marry, she becomes immortal, as would be absolutely necessary in my mind, and then divorces me? What happens to our secret then?

“Good points, Henry. I’ve reconciled myself to the idea that this secret will get out much sooner than we will like, but I steadfastly refuse to do anything unethical or unfairly restrictive to keep it from happening. This decision is yours to make. And if you feel that the injection should be given to Jenna at some point, we could never refuse your request. You’ve earned it, as has everyone in our little group, all the Sandstrøms included.” He winked at Hannah.

“I’m going to grow up with Eli. We’re going to get the injection on the same day. Oskar and Jason too. We’ve already decided.” Hannah said firmly.

Jack laughed, “I’m glad you all are so certain. I’ll take that as my inspiration and go for it right now, Doctor. I’m ready. 26 is old enough.”

“Nils, you and Livia have agreed to do this right now also; correct?”

“Yes, Richard. We’re ready also. Other than you, we’re already the oldest at 37 and 39.”

“Okay, then. Now that we know where we all stand, we need to discuss...others. Elaine?” he sat down.

Elaine stood up, then walked slowly around the table, putting her hand on each shoulder as she passed. “There are many unspoken thoughts here, I know. And I suspect these thoughts are about those outside the group, whom we wish to ‘save’ from death. Any ideas? Should we vote? Should it have to be unanimous? Should we even consider it at all? Or should we hold a press conference and just give it all away now, before it’s discovered; while we still have a bit of control over how it would become general knowledge?”

“As long as Einstein is included, I don’t care.” Hannah said quickly. “Except Grandma, of course. And Uncle Jon and Aunt Judy. And...”

Elaine interrupted. “Thank you, Hannah. And now you all understand the problem. We suddenly have, merely by taking no action at all, the power to kill people, or conversely, save them by injecting them. We have the cure to a ‘disease’ that, up until now, has had a 100% fatality rate. So what are we ethically obliged to do as a result? Keep this to ourselves and selectively pick those whom we want to live, and ignore the rest, based entirely on the randomness of who we happen to know and care about because of the accident of where we happen to live? What about poor, innocent children with incurable diseases? What about great writers? Great artists? Great scientists? And great leaders?”

“Them too! We should save them too!” Eli said, excitedly.

“Well then. What about all their loved ones? Even those without such stellar reputations? Even the, perhaps, undeservingly-loved black sheep of their families, like myself when I was young and stupid?”

“Mama, what are you talking about? You’re not a ‘black sheep.’”

“My father would have disagreed with you, Butterfly, at least at one point in my life. But you’ve made my second point for me. One man’s devil is another’s angel. Who’s going to make these life-and-death decisions?”

Nils shook his head, “Elaine, Is it really valid to look at this as a cure for a disease? Aging and death are a part of life, a necessary part, it could be argued, in order for evolution to even take place. One generation dies to make room for the next, and life evolves from one-celled creatures into the almost infinite diversity of life in existence today. This would have been impossible if nothing died.”

“But everything and everyone dies eventually, Nils. By accident or, in the case of mankind, often by design. We need to quit calling the result of this injection ‘immortality.’ It cures aging, not death. The human death toll every year by accident, natural disaster, famine, drowning; all would continue unabated. In fact, one could argue that, if everyone ceased aging, the population growth alone would create tremendous pressure on our civilization, increasing the likelihood of more war, more famine, more murder.”

“But, what can we do then? What should we do?” Livia asked. “It sounds to me like we don’t really have an ethical choice other than to make the vaccine known, and hope that civilization won’t come crashing down around us.”

“Does anyone other than Livia see where this discussion is going?” Dawson asked quietly.

“She’s right, of course. We have no ethical choice other than making this research known. In fact, if you all agree, Jonathan proposes that first, he, through Archaeogenetics, introduce the basic research in an established medical journal for peer review, as though it has just been discovered. Then it will slowly make its way into more prestigious publications, but presented initially as a method for stopping the process whereby cells become gradually degraded after years and years of division, which is, put very simply, the root cause of aging. He thinks that, if we present it in this way, society will get used to the idea long before the full ramifications of it

are realized, including the fact that it really halts physical maturing, as well as aging, at the exact time it is given. When that aspect of it is discovered, as it most certainly will be, it will be a 'surprise' to all of us, considered an undesirable side effect by many, and may actually result in a further delay in presenting a finished product to the general public. And, of course, it prevents, at least as far as we can tell, the onset of disease of any kind, another attribute we will not mention at first. Neither of us have had so much as a cold since we stopped aging. And remember, literally thousands of papers are submitted to medical journals every year. When is the last year you can remember when several promising cures for cancer haven't been touted in these journals and in the news? The general public has become quite skeptical of all these claims, and they'll be skeptical of this one, especially if we keep the claims as modest as possible."

"But what about the effects on society, Richard, even if it doesn't happen for many years? When everyone is vaccinated, all hell could break loose." Nils put his arm around Livia. "Are we sure we want to live in a society going through such turmoil?"

"Think about it Nils. How long has it taken for any successful vaccine to propagate to all countries and all peoples, even after it is approved? In the history of mankind, even with the many successful vaccines developed, only Smallpox has become extinct. If this develops gradually, and consequently its benefits understood only gradually, it could take many, many years before its full effects on society are realized. By then, reproductive laws that already exist in some countries could become the norm, rather than the exception."

"Jack, Elaine and I have discussed this at great length, as you may have guessed by how much preparation has already been put in place at Archaeogenetics, through Jonathan. But I wanted you all to understand our thought process, and what better way than to have you go through it yourselves, albeit with gentle guidance by Elaine to make sure you didn't stray too far from 'the path.' Now, are we all agreed that this is the best way to handle this? Hannah and Jason; your input here is also welcome."

"What about Einstein, Mr. Dawson? The injection worked on the mice, didn't it? It should work on Einstein too, right?"

"Right, Hannah. Einstein can have the injection along with your Mom and Dad even though, ironically, I consider the animal immortality ramifications an equally difficult problem to surmount. Is that your only question?"

She smiled at him and nodded.

"Did you understand the discussion? Do you agree that this is the right path to follow?" He knew Oskar and Eli agreed. Over the years, they had discussed this often enough that he had a solid idea as to where they stood, even if the question had never been directly asked. But Hannah wasn't Eli; smart, yes, but worldly, no. He wanted to make sure she understood.

"Yes sir. You're too nice to do anything else. Mrs. Dawson, and...and Jack; you're all too nice to not let everyone have this choice for themselves. I can't even imagine you thinking anything else. That's why I like you all so much. You always do the right thing."

Livia gave her a hug. “They do don’t they sweetie? Even when your dad and I are too stubborn to see it, they still do the right thing. Jason?”

Jason looked at Hannah, then nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I think I understand. It sounds okay to me.”

“What about vampires, Richard? Have you scrubbed the vampire DNA from this vaccine completely, or will astute researchers find remnants of it in their studies?”

“It will eventually happen, Nils, even if they don’t understand what they’ve found. After all, it’s derived from the same culture that became the cure for vampirism and makes the recipient immune to the bite of a vampire. Parts of it remain in the strand as junk DNA so they’ll certainly find it. But since vampires don’t exist in their world, I’m not sure what they’ll make of it.”

“Now then. This will have a minimal effect on our plans. We know the vaccine works, and will proceed accordingly. It will be given freely to any one of our friends or relatives we choose to give it to and who choose to accept it, of course. In the meantime, the authentication of the vaccine, including determination of its side-effects and potential safety issues, will plod slowly but deliberately through the system until it’s finally recognized for what it is and becomes available to all. Until then, we will all keep as low a profile as possible.”

Dawson stood up. “Let’s get to it then.” He opened his bag, laid the syringes on the table, and one by one, unceremoniously injected each of them with Eli’s vaccine. Hannah held Einstein tightly after explaining carefully to him that it would just hurt a little. *Anything for a banger; even a cold one*, he thought to himself, as Eli waved it tantalizingly in front of his nose. *But I would have done it for nothing*.

“Stay, Einstein.” She whispered to him. Papa smiled and let him have it. Einstein wagged his tail and wolfed down the banger.

“Don’t get used to those, Einstein.” Hannah scolded. “We’re going home now, back to our normal routine, where you only get dog food, remember?” She grinned at him.

Whatever! Einstein knew she was just bluffing; he had a good memory.

§

“I think that should do it then. Nils, we’re going to miss you all! You fit into our household much better than any of us could have imagined, even under the worst of conditions.”

“A little too well, I think, Richard.” Nils said. “It’s taken us four days to get our act together enough to finally leave. The leak in the roof that damaged the floor in the upstairs playroom in our absence, made things even harder. We couldn’t very well move back in while those repairs were going on.”

Eli grabbed Einstein around the neck and gave him a big hug. "I'm going to miss you too, Einstein." He licked her face somberly, sensing the seriousness of the situation. She had tears in her eyes, and he knew what that meant. He had lived with Hannah long enough to know.

Finally, she put her arms gently around Hannah and kissed her on the cheek. "Kindred spirits?" she whispered.

"Kindred Spirits!"

"Blood sisters?"

"Blood sisters!"

Oskar took their hands in his. Hannah and Eli smiled at him.

"Oskar, you say the nicest things," Hannah hesitated a moment; then looked down at her feet. "And I...I'll never forget what you did for me that night, Oskar. Never."

"Come on, Hannah! We live 20 minutes away. You've got a cell phone. Eli's coming over in two weeks! We'll see them every day at school! Quit being so mushy!" Jason complained. "Remember, Oskar. I've got your back." He grinned at him.

"Thanks, Jason!"

Oskar was finally looking forward to school. He and Eli together, and already, two close friends to show them the ropes. It couldn't get any better than that.

They all stood together on the sidewalk and waved until they were out of sight.

"Why am I so sad, Mama? I know they're nearby and I can see Hannah almost whenever I want to."

"Because things are changing, Eli. And sometimes when things are really good, change isn't as welcome as it could be. And half our family isn't going to be here anymore; Hannah won't be sharing your room with you or sleeping with you now."

Eli stole a look at Oskar, blushed, then smiled shyly at him. She took his hand and they walked slowly toward the house together. Eli, for the first time in a long while, thought about the wonderful changes to come in their own lives.

"Where are you two going? We have work to do." Elaine called after them.

"What, Mama?"

"Come with me." she turned down the hall toward the studio.

Eli gasped as she saw the freshly-painted door on Elaine's heavy easel. "Mama, it's beautiful! Why didn't you tell me you were going to do this? I would have loved to have watched. Especially now that we have our eyes back!"

"Watched? You're going to help me with the other side, now that this one's dry. And then, we need to decide where to put it."

"Maybe the studio door," Oskar volunteered.

"I was thinking of, perhaps, your door, Eli."

"My door? No Mama! It's your door. It belongs here where you paint and make your beautiful things. Please put it here. Oskar's right."

"Are you sure, Eli? It's yours if you want it."

"I want it here, Mama. But there's one thing I'd like to do to the door if it's okay with you."

"Anything you like, Butterfly. It's your door too. It's the door you opened when you came to visit me that night, when we flew together for the first time."

"Can I...I mean may I...paint your rose red? Would that be awful?"

No, Eli. As long as your rose can remain white. You've always been my white rose, since the first day we met. Mama smiled at her. "I trust your new eyes, Eli. You pick the exact red you want. We'll turn the door over for you. Give me a hand, Oskar."

They gently lifted the door off the easel and turned it over. Oskar stood there for a few minutes, as Eli and Mom talked intently about all the possible nuances and shading of the rose; then, realizing that, not only was he way out of his element, he was bored to death, he quietly retreated upstairs to his room.

He sat down at his computer, and smiled to himself as he remembered the look on Jason's face when he had solved the final Myst puzzle, and imprisoned the culprits forever. He replayed the finale, then turned it off, kicked off his shoes, flopped down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. It was so quiet, he couldn't stand it. No Hannah, no Jason, no Einstein. No heated discussion floating up the stairs at the end of the last Bridge hand. He thought about how much things had changed over the last few months, and especially how things had changed between Eli and him. He wasn't sure he liked it, all things considered. He was beginning to wonder if they had made a mistake, trying to grow up. If sex was always this complicated, he could do without it, no matter how good it was supposed to feel; indeed as good as it had already felt, and they hadn't even...done it yet. All he could think about was that, if not doing it felt this good, what must doing it feel like? He shook his head. He still felt uneasy about the whole thing and didn't know why. It just seemed as though it unnecessarily complicated their love for each other. It was so easy before and now it was getting too hard...he closed his eyes and nodded off; he was too tired to think about it anymore.

§

“Oskar! Wake up!” Eli whispered.

“What? Eli? What are you...”

She put her finger to her lips. “Oskar, come.” she took his hand and pulled on it gently until he stumbled to his feet, and let her lead him across his room toward the door. He gasped as she stepped into the circle of moonlight streaming through his window. She was naked.

“Eli, we can’t...”

“Shut up, Oskar,” she whispered. She opened the bathroom door and stepped aside as a cloud of steam poured through the open doorway. The smell of flowers washed over him and through the still rising steam, he could just make out the bathtub filled almost to the brim with bubbles.

She pulled him in, shut the door behind him, and without saying a word, gracefully stepped into the tub, slid down, and momentarily disappeared beneath the bubbles. She popped back up, grinned at him and held out her hand.

He melted. She was just so damned cute he couldn’t stand it. He slipped out of his clothes, gingerly took her hand and stepped into the tub.

She pulled him down beside her and gave him a big wet kiss on the cheek. “Oskar, do you remember when I was hibernating and you kept giving me baths? Would you do it again now? Please?” Without even waiting for an answer, she closed her eyes and went limp in his arms. He gasped and quickly grabbed her behind the shoulders just before her head went underwater. She opened one eye just a bit, peeked at him, smiled and quickly closed it again.

He carefully rose up on his knees, still holding her around the shoulders, and reached for the washcloth. As he gently began washing her face, he remembered vividly those dark anxious days, and how frail and emaciated she had been, and how fragile she had looked. And yet she had still been as beautiful to him as ever; even more so he realized, because he had been afraid she might never wake up and he would lose her forever. And as he looked down at her beautiful face, he realized nothing had changed, except for the better. He had loved her now for over 14 years. 14 perfect years and all without the complications sex brought to the table. He was damned if he was going to let it change anything. He leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead. He gently washed her, absently watching the rainbow-hued half-bubbles slide smoothly over her skin and disappear silently back into the pink bubble clouds completely surrounding her—a pint-sized wingless angel, light as a feather, asleep on a cloud. He thought about how much of his life was packed into this small, ancient, not-a-boy, not-really-a-girl ageless child seer, then turned her over, gently washed her beautiful pixie back, then repeated the same ritual twice more, until finally, being careful not to let her face slip under water, he climbed out of the tub, lifted her up and placed her gently on her towel, and dried her off. He turned to

pick up his own when, out of the corner of his eye, he caught her peeking at him again. “Caught you!”

She giggled and closed her eyes tightly.

Oskar dried himself off, carefully picked her up, towel and all, and carried her into her room. He laid her gently on the bed, toweled off her hair as best he could, then spread it out across her pillow. He lay down beside her and pulled the blanket up around them, tucking it tightly around her to keep her warm, just as he had done so many times so long ago. He closed his eyes, then wrapped his legs around hers and tucked her arms up against his chest, rubbing her hands together between his. When he finally opened them, her beautiful blue eyes were staring directly into his.

“I remember everything, Oskar,” she whispered. “And then you would do this;” she caressed his cheek softly. “And then...this;” she ran her fingers through his hair. “And then, this;” she kissed each of his eyes, then his forehead, then his lips.

“And then...I did this,” Oskar said softly, as he wrapped his arms around her and rocked her gently back and forth. Eli snuggled up against his neck, kissed him lightly there, and relaxed in his arms. He rocked her back and forth until her breathing became slow and steady, and then...ever so quietly, a sound; a soft, familiar sound that grew in intensity until ... *She’s purring!! But she can’t! She’s not...* In a happy daze he kept rocking her, desperately afraid that if he stopped, she’d never purr again. He loved it when she purred and had been so very sad when the cure had seemingly ended it forever. But now...perhaps it was her eyes. Maybe the purr came back with her eyes. He didn’t know and didn’t care. It was back and he was happy. He squeezed her gently and kissed her on the cheek – she purred even louder. He took a deep, full breath, taking the essence of her into himself; her softness, her ethereal pixie face, her flowery smell, her beautiful unselfish love, her singular strength, her gentle, unassuming grace. *It doesn’t ever get any better than this*, he thought to himself.

I love you, Oskar! He felt it deep in his heart. It sang out to him in beautiful harmony and she, in turn, rocked him to sleep with its sweet lullaby. And he knew now with absolute conviction that he would never again forget the words.

Chapter 15: The Castle**Oskar's 14th Birthday, May 30,1996**

Dad handed the large, white envelope to Oskar. "Jonathan assured me that this is actually a conditional present for both of you. It was completed a bit ahead of schedule, unusual for such an...undertaking, so it was decided that your birthday would be the perfect time to reveal it to you."

"What could it be, Oskar? Last year, you got the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe, all first editions. Maybe this year you got an autographed photo of him," Eli said, hefting the envelope carefully. It was too light for anything significant, and too thin to have much in it at all.

"Ha, ha! And how would that be a present for you, Eli? I know! Maybe it's an autographed picture of Shakespeare, since you got the complete works last year for your birthday."

Papa smiled as he remembered the look on her face when she realized the set was missing one volume; the very volume she had given him from her tomb. Including that volume, the set was complete, and probably worth a fortune. They had great fun trying to figure out whether or not Gudmund had bought it at the same time she bought hers, in anticipation of her distant birthday.

"Well, don't just stand there, Oskar; open it!" Elaine put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed.

He bent the brads straight, slipped the flap over them, and pulled out several glossy photographs, and another, smaller envelope. "What's this, Dad?"



“It looks like an island to me, Oskar.” Papa put his arm around Eli and winked at her.

“But...why? What does it mean?” Oskar looked at the next photo:



“Eli’s eyes got big. “Sandstrøm Home? Dawson Home?” Papa! What does it mean?”

“Remember that castle we talked about Eli? The one in Romania?”

“Papa! You were just kidding!...Weren’t you?”

“Jonathan told me just a little about this place last year, Eli. I just embellished the tale a bit. And, after all, isn’t your home your castle?”

“Eli! Did you see this?” Oskar pointed to a smaller house just north of the compound, with two suspiciously familiar gables on the roof. “Eli’s and Oskar’s Home (2002),” he read.

Elaine smiled at them. “That’s for...later.”

Eli and Oskar grinned at each other. This time, Oskar wasn’t the least bit embarrassed.

Eli pulled out another photograph:



“Wow! Look at that! It’s a lighthouse! Our island has a lighthouse!” Oskar exclaimed.

“How big is the island, Papa? And where is it?”

It’s small, Eli; about eight square kilometers, and it’s located off the west coast. I’m not going to tell you exactly where just yet.”

“Is this a forest?” Oskar pointed to a dark area near the east end of the island.

“A small one, Oskar. Not like you’re used to seeing in Sweden. After all it’s a small island.”

“How do we get there, Papa? When can we go?”

“Duhh! See the airstrip, Eli?” Oskar needled her.

Oskar’s right of course. And there’s also a helicopter pad near the lighthouse. The government has authority over that small area of the island, and in return has allowed Archaeogenetics, through Genterapi Ltd., to install part of the solar grid that provides most of the power to the island.

“Look at this, Eli.” Oskar pulled out another photo.



“That’s an old photo, Oskar. Jonathan informed me that the entire hillside is covered with panels now.”

“Papa...”

“We’ll decide when to go as soon as the Sandström s join us for the party, Eli. We have a lot to talk about. Nils and Livia already know about this, or at least the reasons why it’s being revealed to you so soon.”

“Why, Papa? I thought we weren’t to get everything until we were 21.”

“Believe me, Eli; this is far from everything. And you’re not exactly ‘getting’ it. We’ll just be using it.”

“You mean it’s not Oskar’s present after all?”

No! I mean yes. I mean, it is your present Eli. Yours and Oskar’s. When you’re 21. It’s being made available to you now, not only because it’s Oskar’s birthday, but because...” He looked at Elaine, who nodded to him, with a look on her face that Eli couldn’t read. “Because of the research going on there and the need for absolute secrecy. Jack has been there for 5 months now. And there have been some developments. Jonathan wants Elaine there. And you.”

“But why, Papa? Why Mama and me?”

“Because of your...unique histories, Eli. I won’t say anything more than that. But the island, within the limits described in the small envelope, is available to you for any purpose, and I DO mean any purpose. You can come and go as you like at Genterapi’s expense, make use of any of the facilities there, explore the caves, climb the trees, anything you like. All the assets of Genterapi Ltd. are at your disposal, again within the described limits.”

“Now, Papa! We want to go now!”

“Patience, Eli. Shouldn’t you see who’s at the door?”

Oskar was already opening it when Eli got there. “It’s just us, Eli!” Hannah grabbed Oskar and hugged him. “Happy birthday, Oskar.” she handed him a present. “This is from Jason and me.”

Jason winked at him. “You’re going to really like it!” he whispered.

Einstein jumped up and smothered Eli with kisses as though to say *I’m glad to see you too.*

§

Eli and Hannah sat on the edge of the pool, feet dangling in the water, talking quietly together. The date had been set. They were all leaving for a week’s stay on the island in two days. Hannah had helped Eli lay out all her clothes for the trip and had put her hair up in a bun after swimming, but they had avoided talking about the specifics of the trip until now.

“Hannah, I think...I hope...” she began again. “You know Jack has been gone for over five months now, and Papa just told us that he has been on the island all that time, working with Jonathan on something.”

“What, Eli? What’s he working on?” Hannah was puzzled. Jack had been helping her with her science project, off and on, for almost that whole period via regular e-mail messages, and his e-mail address hadn’t changed. She knew he was busy, which was why he hadn’t stopped by; but on an island? Doing secret, exciting stuff and he hadn’t even told her?

“Papa says he wants Mama and me there for some...tests of some kind. Because of our ‘unique histories.’” She put her arm around her, “Hannah, I think it’s about the wings!” Her voice was almost a whisper.

“Really?!” Hannah couldn’t believe it. “You mean you’ll get your wings back? Eli, that’s...wonderful!! You’ll be my fairy again!”

Eli took her face in her hands when she saw the tears in her eyes. “You too, Hannah! You’ll have them too, or I won’t do it!”

“Of course you’ll do it! You have to! Promise me you’ll do it no matter what!” Hannah was really worried. She knew her parents would never agree to her getting wings. She wasn’t even allowed the eyes until she was 18. “Promise! Right now!”

“Okay, Hannah. I promise,” she said softly. She could see how upset Hannah was, and realized immediately why. “But you have to promise me that you’ll get them as soon as your mom and dad say it’s okay.”

“Of course, Eli. I promise.”

“Don’t say anything to anyone about it though. I could be wrong. I just had to tell you, just in case. You’re my kindred spirit. You and Oskar both understand how much I loved them.”

“You’re not wrong, Eli. That’s what it is, I’m certain. Otherwise, Jack would have told me where he was, or at least what he was doing. That’s the only thing he could have been doing that he wouldn’t tell me because he would know how hard it would be for me to keep it from you.”

“Hannah, you’re amazing! Why do you think Jack would have told you where he was if it was some other secret?”

“Because he would never lie to me, and that would have been a ‘Lie of Omission.’ A lie told to keep from hurting you until he knew for sure that the wings would work, is the only lie he would ever, ever tell me. I know it, and that’s final. You’re getting your wings, and they’re going to work.”

And Eli knew she was right. Whenever Hannah was that certain, she was always right. Finally, she dared to think about it as if it were a real truth. She was getting her wings back at last. And Mama too. They could fly together again, like before.

“Oh Hannah! I love you so much!”

Hannah grinned at her, stood up and grabbed her arm, “Come on, Eli. I’m going to make you pretty. If you love me so much, you’ll let me do it.” She had brought some of her favorite dresses over to show Eli, but she knew it would be difficult to get her excited about them. Eli was, after all, very like a boy in most things, clothing included, and in her attitude, in spite of recent

physical developments. After all, they were thirteen and a half now. Dresses really fit them the way they were supposed to. Besides, she loved making Oskar uncomfortable. This was a win-win for her.

“Well?” she tapped her foot impatiently.

“Okay, okay!” Eli pretended to be irritated, and obediently allowed herself to be dragged up the stairs to her room, where Hannah proceeded to work her ‘magic’ on her, over and over again, until she was satisfied. Tubes of lipstick, mascara brushes and various multi-colored jars and powder-laden pads covered Eli’s desk by the time Hannah was finished. They grinned at each other in the full-length mirror and turned around several times, admiring and complimenting each other. Eli had to admit; she was actually enjoying herself. Hannah was contagious.

Hannah slipped a tape into the recorder, pressed the ‘play’ button, and held out her hand. “May I have this dance?” The waltz music swelled up around them

Eli attempted a curtsy, failed miserably, took her hand, put her arm around her waist, and they danced quietly together around and around the room. She felt so relaxed and happy, thinking about all the wonderful times they would have together just like this, forever. Hannah was so unpredictable and so full of life that she was able to suck Eli into her world effortlessly. It had been that way from the very beginning, she realized. She laid her head on her shoulder, and uncharacteristically, let Hannah lead, which Hannah did, with great enthusiasm. Soon, they were a blur of deep blue charmeuse, and white satin as they spun around together in a graceful waltz.

They heard the twin gasps as the door was flung open, and Jason and Oskar stood there, dumfounded, mouths wide open. The two of them had been completely absorbed in Oskar’s new video game, Riven, the sequel to Myst, blissfully unaware of the activities next door until they heard the music pouring through Eli’s closed door.

“You’re...you’re beautiful!” The words spilled out of Oskar’s mouth before he could stop them. He felt like an idiot, especially with Jason standing right next to him.

“Wow! Sis, you’ve outdone yourself. You’re gorgeous! Both of you!” he slapped Oskar on the back. “Now, the question is, which is which? I’m sure Oskar wants to know in the worst way! And I’m just a bit curious myself.”

Oskar breathed a sigh of relief. If he had made a fool of himself, apparently Jason hadn’t noticed.

They both giggled, “You’re going to have to guess,” White Satin said.

“And you have to dance with the one you pick,” Blue Charmeuse said.

“I’m not going to touch this one,” Jason said, “You pick, Oskar.”

“No touching!” Blue Charmeuse batted her pixie eyes at him.

“Hannah? You must be Hannah. That’s something Hannah would say.”

“Oskar? Where’s your twin brother?” White Satin asked, a mischievous grin on her face.

“You’re Hannah! Only Hannah would know about that morning.”

She smiled at him and backed away, wagging her fingers at him, “Bulleribulleri bock, Oskar.”

“Eli? You’re Eli!”

“Cooooome ... coooooom ... I have candy and ... banaaaanas!” Blue Charmeuse whispered in a familiar ghostly voice.

He realized he had absolutely no idea which was which. They had outsmarted him. Unless...

“Jason? Which dress is Hannah’s?”

“Both of them, Oskar. They’re both Hannah’s.”

His eyes lit up, and he confidently stepped over to the beautiful apparition dressed in the strapless blue charmeuse dress—that came to just above her knees, he noticed. *She’s so...pretty.*

“May I have this dance?” He held out his hand.

“How did you guess, Oskar?” Eli pouted.

“Blue’s your favorite color and the dress matches your eyes. And Hannah, because she’s Hannah, would have let you wear whichever one you liked best.”

“Oskar, are you sure you don’t have a twin brother? If you do, he’s mine, remember.” Hannah grinned at him. “But he has to be at least as smart as you.” Jason took her hand and led her to the center of the room. He kissed his little sister on the forehead, bowed, and spun her around.

Oskar didn’t notice. All he could see was Eli; how absolutely beautiful she was, how sweet she smelled, how much he loved her and how wonderful she felt in his arms. And how happy he was that they had picked a waltz.

Oskar doesn’t look a bit uncomfortable to me, Hannah thought to herself as Jason really got into it; he had always been a good dancer. She smiled as she gave her big brother a hug. *Guess I can’t win ‘em all.*

§

“Look, Hannah! That’s you!” Eli moved away from the window so Hannah could see the Archaeogenetics logo on the side of the sparkling white building, as the Learjet 55C made a U-turn and taxied back down the runway.

“You were cute as a bug when you were ten, Hannah. What happened?” Jason joked.

Hannah reached over the seat and punched him on the shoulder.

“Seat belts on until the plane stops, Hannah.” Elaine scolded.

“Sorry!”

The plane turned and taxied slowly towards the huge white warehouse, the southern border of the fenced compound comprising the warehouse and both large, red-brick two-story houses and a few assorted outbuildings. They could see the beautiful, flawless expanse of green lawn though the open gate next to the warehouse as the plane rolled to a stop.

As the engines wound down, Eli saw a door at the end of the main building open, and immediately recognized Jack and Jonathan as they stepped out and hurried toward the plane. The ground crew had already chocked the wheels and had begun securing the plane to the ground with cables when the engines finally fell silent. Hannah waved to Jack through the window and grinned from ear to ear as he waved back.

“Welcome to Phoenix Island,” Jonathan shouted. The children poured out of the plane onto the tarmac, followed by The Dawson and the Sandstrøm adults, just as two large golf carts swung around the side of the building and pulled up beside them. Two men unloaded all their luggage and sorted it out into two piles—one for each house—loaded up the carts, then headed through the gate and disappeared around the corner along the narrow paved pathway next to the warehouse.

Jack put one arm around Eli and the other around Hannah and led them to the end of the tarmac. “I’ve really missed my favorite girls in the whole world,” he grinned at them. “I couldn’t be prouder of both of you. Your grades in school were exemplary of course, and Hannah, your science project in genealogy was reviewed, at my request, by Jonathan, who was quite impressed. He told me that your attention to detail was above and beyond anything he had seen in someone so young.” He turned to Eli. “Of course, you’re excluded from this review, because you’re over 200 years old. You are, and always have been, in a category all by yourself. I’ve watched you work with your Papa in the lab for years now. You don’t need a recommendation; you have 14 years of experience and an impressive, albeit secret, résumé already. You two are so much alike in talent and tenacity, it’s a bit frightening.”

“Thank you, Jack. And thank Jonathan for me. You...you didn’t have to...” Hannah stammered.

“Jack, you’ve been around Papa too long. You always know just what to say!” Eli smiled up at him.

“I learned from the best, Eli.” He kissed them each on the forehead. “But I meant every word of it.”

“Now, I have to spend some time with your parents before dinner. Would you like to walk to your new homes, or should I get you a cart?” Jack gestured to Oskar, who hurried up beside them with Jason.

“If we get a cart, can I drive?” Jason asked.

“Only if you have a Phoenix Island Cart License, Jason,” Jack kidded. “And Jonathan is a pretty tough driving instructor. All kidding aside, I don’t see why not...in the future; but not today.”

“Let’s walk, Eli! It’s so pretty, I want to see it all! Oskar? Jason? Is that okay?”

“Yep! Let’s go!” The boys headed for the gate, followed quickly by Eli and Hannah. Hannah turned and waved to Jack as she disappeared around the corner.

§

The four adults followed Jack and Jonathan down the long terrazzo-floored corridor. Everything was so white and clean, it almost hurt Elaine’s eyes, but it just amplified the sense she got that no expense had been spared in this endeavor. At a wide space in the center of the building, Elaine was surprised to see a set of elevators set back in the wall, one of which was an open freight elevator. *Even the freight elevator is spotless.* Elaine smiled to herself. She also noticed that there were two lower levels indicated on the light panel above the doors. She shook her head. *This building appears to be set on solid rock. Excavating a two-story basement must have been a huge expense,* she thought to herself.

Finally, Jonathan ushered them into a small conference room near the end of the corridor. Tea, Coffee and assorted pastries were visible on the cart at the other end of the room. “Help yourselves! We have a lot to talk about.” He sat down at the head of the table; Jack sat down at the other end.

Rich and Elaine helped themselves to some tea, then sat down across from Nils and Livia.

“You’ve been briefed on the plane as to what this is about,” he began, “but there are many consequences of this research that we should discuss, some of which were a bit...unexpected, to say the least. We’ll be discussing the wings, or more specifically, the mechanism that allows the wings to function efficiently in spite of the impossibly low, at least in theory, surface area-to-load ratio; and to grow, in spite of the huge amount of energy required for it to happen; and, as a side issue, how the instinctive, or hard-wired, flying abilities are integrated into the human brain via the Fragile neural network provided by the parasite and how the extreme wing and spar sensitivity affects and expands proprioception.”

“Jonathan, I think we should stick to the basics. These are all exceedingly interesting subjects to us, but we don’t want to put anyone to sleep.”

“Sorry, Richard. You’re absolutely right. It’s a fault of mine to get enamored of the details and forget the big picture. It’s certainly caused your family enough trouble already. Why don’t you

lead the way?” Jonathan still regretted the problems between the two families caused by his cavalier handling of the ‘big reveal’ so long ago.

“These issues actually pale into insignificance compared to what we’ve discovered about the strength issues associated with the ability to grow and use wings – really the basic essence of what makes a vampire so dangerous,” Richard continued. “It’s really a game changer. With the wings comes something potentially darker: Inhuman strength and resilience.”

“What do you mean, Richard?” Nils asked. He was beginning to feel a bit uneasy.

“How dangerous do you think Eli would have been for over 200 years with the strength of a scrawny 12-year-old boy, no matter what he ate for dinner?”

“Rich! What an awful thing to say!” Elaine scolded.

“I’m trying to make a point, Elaine.” He paused, “You, on the other hand, have proven to be quite dangerous in spite of your loss. And I’m quite sure Oskar and Eli would agree with me.” He winked at her.

Nils laughed. “I get your point, Richard, but aren’t you taking a chance, given what you’ve just told us? If you are truly going to give Elaine back her wings, shouldn’t you be a bit more careful what you say on the eve of her new ‘darkness?’”

“Thank you, Nils. You’ve segued nicely into the next part of the discussion; the reasons why Elaine and Eli are here.”

“We’re sitting on a keg of dynamite here,” he continued. “I can’t emphasize that fact enough. This is about something you normally find only in science fiction novels. With each injection, we create, essentially, a superman, or as close to it as possible in the real world so far. And there are indications that a vampire, because of its rather unique diet and much more efficient digestive system is at least an order of magnitude stronger yet, but believe me, this increase, by itself, is significant. The main difference between a vampire and a person receiving this injection is that the darkness accompanying the injection is made up entirely of the darkness within all of us. So! How do we know who is capable of receiving this amazing ‘gift’ without, as they say, turning to the dark side? The answer is quite simple, actually. We give it to the only two human beings we know who have been tested, and have proven themselves, even if it was against their will. ”

“But Richard, I can see the logic in giving the injection to Elaine,” Livia said. “She’s an adult and has proven herself as an adult; but Eli? She’s just a child. And she’s growing up now. How do we know she’ll...retain that stability as she ...” Livia’s voice trailed off as she remembered that day Eli showed her what her life was like before Oskar and Richard came into it; and she remembered how Eli had saved Hannah’s life – not just the fact that she had done it, but HOW she had done it; with a minimum of ‘collateral damage.’ And more than once. “Sorry, Richard. That was an absolutely stupid thing for me to say.” She sat back in her chair, a bit embarrassed.

He smiled at her, “It’s okay, Livia, I understand. I went through the same inner turmoil when Eli first came into my life. And until I realized how deep her humanity is rooted in her, she often made me nervous. But now? I would trust her with my life. And, I would trust your own daughter with it too.” He winked at her.

“Not until she’s eighteen, Richard, and is allowed by law to make her own decisions,” Livia said quickly, anticipating the direction Richard was heading. “Nils and I are in complete agreement on this.” She looked over at him, but couldn’t read the expression on his face. “Nils?”

“Of course! You’re absolutely right, Livia. Eighteen.” He was still thinking about the ‘superhuman’ aspects of the injection. Having a ‘superhuman’ daughter could certainly present problems for them – but still...

“Now, then,” Jonathan stepped up to the blackboard. “If all goes as planned, we’ll be injecting them both this evening. Our experiments have shown us that the full effects won’t manifest themselves until roughly 12 hours after that.” He scribbled the timeline on the blackboard, breaking the chalk twice, giving up, tossing it aside and grabbing a new piece. “We’ll test them both in the sunlight tomorrow morning, then go through the wing-growing process slowly inside, out of the sun. Then, we’ll gradually expose the wings, with their much higher concentration of the Strong neural network, to the sun. If they pass that test, we’ll let them fly as soon as the sun goes down. No sense in taking any chances for the first flight.”

“I have a question, Jonathan,” Livia glanced over at Elaine, then at Richard. “Why are you doing this at all? It strikes me as exceedingly dangerous. If this secret ever gets out, the effects on society could be far worse than that of the ‘immortality’ vaccine. Once the origins of the wings and strength becomes linked to the vaccine, just imagine the outcry from religious leaders all over the world, who will consider this a ‘gift from Satan’ or from whomever their ‘bad guy’ happens to be. And the inevitable ‘outing’ of vampires could cause witch hunts that will make the ones that took place in the dark ages look tame by comparison. Because these ‘witches’ are real.”

“Eli!” Jonathan said it as though it should have been self-evident. “This is being done for Eli, first and foremost. I don’t think that Gudmund gave the consequences any thought at all. It wasn’t his nature.” He paused a moment. “And I must confess, I hadn’t given the consequences much thought either, until Richard brought it up over a year ago. But I must also confess, it wouldn’t have made any difference to me. It’s not like we’re creating a doomsday machine or anything of that nature. These abilities can’t bring about the end of the world, like nuclear weapons can do. The only way this discovery could be dangerous is if its use was restricted somehow by those in power. And we won’t allow that to happen. If everyone’s a superman, where’s the imbalance?”

“But everyone won’t be a superman, Jonathan. There will be significant numbers of people who may, for very good reasons, choose not to make the change. Religion is only one reason people may reject this. The change in diet is another. I myself haven’t made a final decision yet. In fact, as we speak, I am personally more against the idea than for it. And, before you ask, my reasons are my own.” Richard squeezed Elaine’s hand.

“I think this would be a good place to stop, at least for me. I think we need to get settled in and feed the children before they get too restless. Livia? Why don’t you and I head over to the compound while the men...finish doing whatever they do when we’re not around?” Elaine headed for the door, with Liva close behind.

§

Oskar and Eli unpacked and settled into their rooms on the second floor of their new ‘family home’ across the hall from each other. Eli’s room faced the small harbor and the forest-covered hills on the other side of the bay; Oskar’s the compound and the sprawling hills to the southwest. Through the porthole window on the north wall of Eli’s room they could just catch a tiny glimpse of the ‘Eli and Oskar’ home, barely visible past the adjoining Sandstrøm home. Jonathan had told them firmly that it was completely off limits to them, unless they wanted to endanger their own futures by learning too much about them. “Look, but don’t touch, and don’t go inside,” he had told them.

“Where should we sleep tonight, Oskar?” she sat next to him and bounced nervously on her new bed, trying to get a feel for it, and maybe break it in just a bit.

“Right here, Eli. We always sleep in your room the first night in a new house. It brings us good luck.” He smiled at her. “I’m sure it’ll be okay with Mom and Dad, but I’ll ask them.”

“Okay Oskar. Let’s go see Hannah’s and Jason’s rooms.” Eli waved to Hannah through her window. Hannah waved back through her own oval window on the south side of their new home.

Eli and Oskar raced down the stairs and headed across the lawn to the Sandstrøm house.

§

Elaine and Eli sat side by side at the kitchen table, sleeves rolled up, as Papa carefully placed the syringes on a clean cloth, folded neatly on an oval stainless-steel tray. “Is everyone ready?”

Eli nodded excitedly. “Yes Papa!”

He sat down beside her, took her hand in his for a moment, then wiped her arm carefully with an alcohol pad. “I took this thing from you that you loved so much, with an injection; now I’m returning it to you. You deserve it, Eli, and it’s my great pleasure to make you whole again.” He pressed the needle into her arm so gently that she didn’t feel a thing.

Eli could see the tears in his eyes. “Thank you, Papa,” she whispered. She kissed him gently on the cheek.

He stepped passed her and sat down next to Elaine. “I don’t know what to say, Elaine. I know you’ve missed your beautiful wings because, together with your beautiful eyes, they made your art so much more powerful and gave you a perspective on the world that any artist would envy. I,

on the other hand, loved them for selfish reasons. They made you mysterious, powerful, and incredibly beautiful. I fell hopelessly in love with you that night you flew me over the city, but I didn't realize it until you came to live with us and worked your magic on me. And when I realized your mystery, your power, and your beauty came, not from your wings but from your soul, I asked you to marry me, and almost died of fright when you initially said 'no.' Somehow I was able to salvage my dignity with a 13-year engagement commitment." He wiped her arm with another alcohol pad, and without further ceremony, gave her the injection.

Elaine smiled at him, put her arms around him and kissed him gently. "You're the love of my life, Richard. If I hadn't loved you so much that night, I might have given you an unconditional 'yes.' But I did love you, and I loved both of your children. Together, you were, and still are, my life." She paused, "And now, my second-greatest wish has been fulfilled. Now I'll be able to protect you from harm, and keep you all safe until you come to your senses and inject yourself. You have no idea how much I wanted my wings and my strength when I watched helplessly as those animals took Jason, invaded our home, and almost killed you all. I swear to you now; this will NEVER HAPPEN AGAIN, while I'm alive." There were tears in her eyes, which she quickly swept away with the back her hand. "Sorry," she mumbled. Eli slid into her lap and put her arms around her.

§

"How are you ever going to get to sleep!" Oskar said, excitedly.

"I don't know, Oskar. But I am really tired. Maybe the injection is making me tired." Even as she spoke, Eli could feel strangely familiar stirrings deep inside her, as her body went through the changes. *Eight more hours to go!*

"Does this mean you'll chase me again?" Oskar asked, hopefully. Even though they often went through the motions, now that he was taller and stronger than she was, it wasn't as much fun as it had been before. He had sort of enjoyed fleeing for his life after he baited her to the point where she pretended to lose her temper, especially when she finally caught him, golden eyes blazing and just the hint of fangs in her mouth.

"Count on it, Oskar! You've gotten away with things around here waaaaay too long." Her eyes turned golden in anticipation.

Oskar pretended to shudder. "Well, don't get too big-headed or I'll move up the schedule and get my own wings before I'm 18. Dad and Mom both say I don't need to wait if everything goes as expected with you and Mom."

Eli giggled, just trying to imagine Oskar with wings. She pictured him flying into walls, tumbling out of the sky, and crashing through trees as he practiced, just like on the TV show, "The Greatest American Hero." And Oskar saw it all.

"What's so funny?" He smacked her on the arm. "Dad says flying will be instinctive; I won't have to learn."

“Even I had to learn some of the fine points, Oskar, just like a baby bird. But Mama! She flies so beautifully – not at all like me. She told me she’d teach me.” Eli was really looking forward to those night flights again.

“I’m so happy for you, Eli. I can hardly wait for tomorrow!” He wrapped the blanket tightly around them both and closed his eyes.

She kissed him gently, snuggled up against him and dropped off to sleep.

Chapter 16: Uncharted Flight

Eli! Are you awake? She kept her eyes closed for a few seconds, fully aware that the sun was up already; she could see it through her eyelids.

Mama?! Is that you? And it was. Mama was sitting on the edge of her bed holding her hand tightly in hers. *You can touch-talk with me again! Without Oskar! Oh Mama!* She leaped into her lap and pressed her face into her chest.

“Oskar discovered it, Eli. He heard me thinking down in the kitchen as soon as he woke up. It seems the ability comes with the wings and the recessive parasite; not the dominant one. He and I had a long overdue, quite productive, talk about your...sleeping arrangements for the future. We’ll talk more when the excitement of the day wears off.” She smiled at her.

Eli quickly put on her new swimsuit and clothes, grabbed Elaine’s hand and dragged her down the stairs to the new kitchen. “Is everyone ready? Is Oskar there already? Of course he is! I can feel him. Is Hannah there yet?”

“Calm down, Eli. Yes to all your questions, except Jack and Jonathan will be arriving in half an hour.”

Eli plopped down in her chair between Hannah and Oskar. Oskar was grinning ear to ear as he held both hands out in front of him. *Look Eli! No touch-talking. It’s just like before! With Mom too!*

She smiled back. *Just like before*, she thought to herself, *but without the independent brain of the dominant parasite*. “Good morning, Hannah! Are you ready to see me fly again?” she hugged her tightly. “And look here,” she whispered, as she pulled back her waistband. “I’m wearing the fairy bikini. For good luck.” They both giggled.

“Good morning, everyone!” Jack stepped in the door with Jonathan trailing close behind him. “I know we’re a bit early, but I knew Eli couldn’t wait.” He winked at her. “Besides, I want to do this before any of you have breakfast.” He placed two half-liter bottles on the table in front of Eli and Elaine. “You need to drink these first, as per our discussion last night. They’re absolutely essential. They’re a combination of a high-protein drink, a mixture of metallic salts and electrolytes, and...another ingredient that we have found to be essential for the efficient operation of your Strong neural network. And I want to make sure you understand that this will have to be a regular part your diet from now on. Bottoms up!”

Eli peered into her bottle, and shook it gently. It had the consistency of milk, but had a light pink caste to it. She sniffed it cautiously. *Raspberries; and Strawberries. Well, at least it won’t taste yucky.* From her own limited experience, things that were good for you generally tasted bad. She took a sip. There was something familiar about the aftertaste she couldn’t put her finger on; sort of metallic. Still, all-in-all, it was quite tasty.

She and Elaine emptied the bottles quickly. “Now what, Jack?”

“Both of you come outside. Do you feel any different this morning?”

Elaine explained the sudden reacquiring of their telepathic abilities, and Eli told him about the stirrings in her body, feelings she’d had since almost immediately after the injection.

“The telepathy comes as a complete surprise. That’s clearly something we couldn’t test for, and it makes me a bit uneasy. Not because it could be dangerous,” he added quickly, “but because it’s unexpected. I like to have all my ducks in a row before we reach this point in any research project; and I evidently didn’t this time.”

They stepped out on the lawn into the full sunlight. They both turned around several times, under the close supervision of both Jonathan and Jack. “Okay. Both of you strip.” Jonathan opened his notebook and jotted down the exact time.

Elaine and Eli took their clothes off and handed them to Jack.

Oskar laughed, “So that’s what Hannah gave you last night when you thought I wasn’t looking. Hannah, it’s really pretty; especially on Eli. But you both look nice in bikinis, Hannah,” he said quickly, hoping he had dodged another bullet.

Jason grinned at him. “Nice save,” he whispered.

“I have one just like it, but with green fairies instead of blue, so you can tell us apart, Oskar.” she chided him.

“You look nice too, Elaine,” Jack said. “Not quite as nice as Eli, though. You should have fairies on yours too.” He winked at her.

“Next time, Jack.” She turned around slowly in the sun, but sensed nothing different; no sign of discomfort whatsoever. She breathed a sigh of relief. “Eli? Do you feel any different?”

“No Mama! But...” She suddenly felt a deep sense of euphoria, as she realized that nothing stood between her and her flying now, except...She tilted her head back, closed her eyes, and held her arms out at her sides. The sun felt so very good on her skin as she spun herself around. She thought about how everyone in the world that loved and supported her was only an arms-length away right now, all there because of her. Even Mama was there because of her, she knew. *I love you, Mama; I love you Oskar.*

“Eli, you’re not supposed to...” Oskar shouted.

Eli reached over her back, unsnapped her top, tossed it aside, and quickly pressed her arms tightly against her sides.

Elaine reached for her, but was too late; Eli saw her coming, took a couple of quick steps away from her, and in one fluid motion, raised her arms over her head and unfurled her wings; her

beautiful black velvety wings that, for the first time ever, were exposed to the light of day. Instantly, Eli felt the sun's warmth penetrate deeply into them, a completely new sensation for her; a sensation that, before now, would have preceded her fiery death by seconds. It felt indescribably good to her, almost as though her wings were drawing additional power from the sun itself. Her chest felt like it was about to burst with joy.

She heard Nils and Liva gasp as she took one final step away from them, then with a single powerful thrust of her wings, lifted off gracefully towards the tall chalk-white fence at the far end of the compound.

Elaine quickly grabbed Oskar's hand. *Eli! Please don't! We have tests to complete. I don't want you to hurt yourself!*

I'm fine, Mama! Can't you tell? She rose up over the fence, flapped her wings hard, and circled back towards them, gaining altitude rapidly. When she passed back over their heads they looked like tiny wide-eyed dolls staring up at her with their mouths open. She smiled at the thought, then remembered that one of them was missing. She felt a deep sadness, thinking about how much Gudmund would have loved to have seen this day. *I loved you so much*, she thought at him fiercely, as visions of him tirelessly hovering over her hibernating form in the darkness filled her mind.

And suddenly, inexplicably, He was there, close by; she could feel Him hovering protectively over her and felt His warmth envelop her. She could almost feel His wings brushing softly against hers, He seemed so close. She held her own wings still as she caught a strong, steady updraft over the small harbor when, suddenly, she felt His fingertips brush lightly against hers, and He was gone.

My sweet Butterfly! Godspeed...but stay close. I'll follow if you need me. Elaine could feel everything Eli felt, and knew she was safe. She closed her eyes and felt Eli's overwhelming joy and happiness, felt the wind in her face, the powerful strokes and the surge upwards as her wings dug into the crisp air; she felt the air currents and eddies around her wingtips, and the sense of freedom and oneness with the world she had almost forgotten. And Gudmund. Had he really been there? She sighed. He had been real enough for Eli, and that's what counted.

She saw the anxious look on Richard's face, and took his hand in hers.

Oskar had taken Hannah's hand and closed his eyes just as Eli cleared the fence. Hannah gasped as she suddenly saw the rapidly-approaching grass-covered hills through Eli's golden eyes. Two powerful strokes of her wings and a tight left turn brought her back overhead in seconds. *Wide-eyed dolls?* She smiled along with Eli. Oskar squeezed her hand tighter, as they watched her fly out over the harbor, catch the updraft and vanish from sight.

Higher and higher she flew. She could see the entire island now, and the coastal cliffs of the mainland far off to the northeast. The plane looked like a toy on the tarmac below her. Over and over again she dove, looped, spun and stalled out, then dropped like a rock, trying to imagine what it would feel like to fall to her death. *Such dark thoughts*, she grinned to herself; but it

didn't seem dark at all to her, because she had her beautiful wings back. Up, up she went, until the plane was a mere speck on the runway and the island looked like a large green spot, barely visible on the vast sparkling blue ocean, surrounded by a thin, ever -changing ring of white, where the waves broke along the shoreline. Then down again at breakneck speed, feeling the powerful g-forces as she unfurled her wings at the last moment and skimmed the surface of the ocean, mere meters below her. She heard Oskar and Hannah gasp for breath. Up she went again, circled over the east end of the island, suspended for a moment by a gentle updraft, then drifted down slowly, feeling the warmth of the sun on her bare back and wings. She dove down over the small forest, dipped into a small meadow near the center, rose up quickly and swung southwest over the lighthouse, then down low against the cliffs, where she could see large white-winged birds flying in and around the caves sprinkled randomly about, even down to the waterline. *How cool is that?!* She heard Oskar cry out, excitedly. Visions of days and days of exploration and adventure filled her mind. If Oskar didn't get his wings, she'd fly him there herself. And Hannah too.

As she rose up over the west end of the island and turned right towards home, she suddenly realized how hungry she was. She felt like she hadn't eaten in days. As she approached the compound, she saw Jonathan passing rapidly through the gate on his cart, heading back towards the house. She circled once more overhead, then on a sudden impulse, landed softly on the roof of their beautiful home, bowed to their applause, then glided gracefully down into Oskar's waiting arms. She wrapped her wings around him, squeezed him tightly, then as Oskar disappeared behind the velvety blackness, took a deep breath, and silently and softly retracted her wings. For a moment, there was silence; then everyone began talking at once.

Nils and Livia, alone, were speechless. They had heard Eli's stories, seen the famous photograph, and talked about the wings at length, but seeing them grow before their eyes in all their beauty and perfection, then watching them in use and sensing their power as their hair was blown back in the backdraft, was another thing altogether. Nils couldn't help but think about his own sweet miracle daughter doing the same and smiled to himself. Eighteen suddenly seemed a long way off. He was more determined than ever to have a talk with Livia about it.

Eli blushed as Elaine handed her a shirt. "Sorry Mama! I couldn't help it."

"You've nothing to feel sorry about, Butterfly. You just did what I so desperately wanted to do myself. Being a child still has its advantages. We adults are held to a higher standard. Enjoy your immunity while you still can." She smiled at her.

Jonathan shoved a liter bottle of the now-familiar mixture into Eli's hands. She was absolutely famished, she realized. She upended it and didn't stop until it was empty. Jonathan handed her another, but Eli shook her head. "Thanks, Jonathan, but one was enough."

Jonathan grinned at her, pulled out his calculator, punched in a few numbers, then proudly announced, "Well, Eli, it seems like you get a minimum of about twenty kilometers per liter, roughly speaking, but of course I didn't factor in most of the significant vertical component, since I have absolutely no idea how high you flew, or how many times you dived. I counted four and I'm sure there were many more. And of course, your body is still using a lot of that energy to

finish the process of refining both neural networks, so your 'mileage' will almost certainly look better in the future I'm sure. And of course part of it went to make up for the 12 hours your body went through the change..." His voice trailed off. "Looks like I'm doing it again aren't I?" he looked down at his feet. "But it still looks like we're going to have to mass-produce this stuff." He paused. "Eli, please let me know if there are any unpleasant side-effects from this. I think we got it right, but you never know..."

"I will! I promise." She was surprised to see that his hands were shaking.

Nils and Livia gathered up Hannah and Jason and headed for their house. "I'll see you tonight Eli. Or earlier if I can. Mom and Dad want to talk to us about Dad's new job. Isn't it exciting!? He'll even be working with Jack some of the time, at least when he's here." Hannah ran ahead of them, took the porch steps two at a time and disappeared into the Sandstrøm home.

"Now! Should we step inside and follow the rules this time?" Jonathan nodded at Elaine and headed for the porch. Once inside, he bombarded Eli with questions. "Did you feel your wings responded to you exactly as before, or were there strength limitations or control problems you hadn't encountered in the past?"

"If there was any difference, I didn't notice. But I wasn't thinking about it."

"Exactly!" He admonished her. "If you had waited until I gave you your new swimsuit and the list of things I wanted you to look out for, your first flight would have been a better baseline for any changes, for better or for worse, you may experience in the future. Now, were you cold? I know it was cold up there. Did you notice it? Our experiments were inconclusive on the resistance to cold provided by the Strong neural network."

"I wasn't cold!" Eli said sullenly. "But I was happy. Does that count?"

"Actually, no. It doesn't. Did you become fatigued after that steep climb you made over the harbor? It appeared as though you had power-climbed over 400 meters after you were assisted by the updraft, but since you didn't have a copy of your flight plan with you, I can only guess at your height at that point."

"I wasn't tired at all. But it felt wonderful when I dove down over the forest; but I guess that doesn't count either," she said sarcastically.

"Only if you knew how fast you were going when you pulled out of the dive, but since we don't know how high you were when you started, we can't know that."

"Then I guess that means my entire flight was a useless exercise, at least to you. To me it was great fun, and I don't really care what you think!" Eli's temper had just about reached the boiling point. *Who does he think he is anyway? I don't have to listen to this.*

"Eli!" Elaine warned. "Stop it! Now!"

“No, it’s my fault, Elaine.” Jonathan said quietly. “I had so much riding on this that I forgot what it was about. In trying to honor my father by fulfilling his wishes, I lost sight of the fact that everything is ultimately for Eli. I apologize, Eli.”

Eli’s rage deflated as quickly as it had puffed up. *How could I have said that to him? He’s made me a girl, he gave me my wings, and he even gave me Hannah. And he was afraid for me; that’s why his hands were shaking. Why didn’t I see that and behave more like an adult?* She reached out and took his hand. “I...I felt him, Jonathan. As the updraft lifted me up, he was there with me. He was there protecting me, and then he was gone. And he wouldn’t have been there if it weren’t for you. I’m so sorry! I shouldn’t have said those things! You’ve done so much for me, and I really am grateful. Sometimes I can be such a...brat.”

Jonathan smiled at her. “You’re many things to me, Eli, but a ‘brat’ isn’t one of them.”

“What do you want me to do, Jonathan? I’ll do whatever you want! When we fly tonight, we’ll do exactly what your list says we should do. I promise. Please give me another chance.”

“It’s a deal! Elaine?” He handed each of them a 5-page flight plan he had prepared. “Now, as a backup, the way you can determine how high you need to be is quite simple, actually. I know it’s a bit awkward, but if you bank either left or right, so as to position your hand between your eyes and the island, arm fully extended, your height is close to 3000 meters when your open hand, from thumb to pinky finger spans the apparent width of the island; remember, not its height, but its width along its long axis. But keep only your dominant eye open. Do you understand what I’m saying?” They could hear the excitement in his voice.

“Did anyone ever tell you what a nerd you are, Jonathan?” Elaine said. “It’s no wonder you and Rich get along so well.” She winked at Eli. “We have plenty of time. Why don’t you let Eli and I go over it together and if we have any questions we’ll get back to you before the flight? Would that work for you?”

“Of course, Elaine! You just let me know.” He stepped outside quickly and returned with a box of liter bottles. “Put these in the refrigerator. They need to be kept cold, like milk, and you’re going to need it tonight; in fact it’s essential. You can never forget.” He rubbed his hands together. “Jack? Let’s go! We have a lot of work to do before it gets dark.” He vanished out the back door, then stepped back in quickly. “Elaine? I’d still like to see your own wings before this evening. Would you please...”

“Of course, Jonathan” She stepped out on the porch and smoothly raised her arms over her head, unfurling her much larger wings.

Jonathan gasped and stepped back involuntarily, almost falling over Eli. “Jack? Where’s Eli’s swimsuit? I entirely forgot. But after all, she wasn’t supposed to fly until tonight.” He handed Eli the brilliant white suit, identical to the one Elaine now wore, then pulled out his tape measure and proceeded to measure the spar lengths, the distance between spar tips, and the distance between the longest wrist spar and the point on her waist where the wing edge merged with the bony ridge just beneath her skin at the waistline.

“I missed your wings more than I realized,” Richard said softly. “They’re even more magnificent than I remembered. But perhaps that’s because I’m seeing them in the daylight for the first time ever.”

Elaine stepped off the porch into the direct sunlight, spun slowly around, wings outstretched, and felt the sun’s warmth, just as Eli had. “Eli, I...wish I were a child right now. If I were, I’d...”

“Do it, Mama! I dare you!”

“Later, Eli. Only with you.” She wrapped her wings around her and kissed her on the forehead.

“Anything else, Jonathan?”

“No, Elaine. That’ll do it until tonight. Thanks!” With a soft crackle, Elaine’s wings faded to white lace, then disappeared.

“Jonathan, Hannah wants her wings now, too. Her mom says ‘no, not until she’s 18,’ but I really think her dad is okay with it. If we can change her mom’s mind, can she and Jason get the injection too? This week, maybe?” Eli looked up at him with her doe eyes. “And Oskar too! I just know I can convince him. He always listens to me.”

He was caught completely off guard. “Eli, I don’t know. There are things that we haven’t worked out completely and ...and” he stammered. “Let me think about it.”

“Eli, leave the poor man alone. He has enough to worry about right now. We’ll discuss this later; tomorrow, perhaps.” Elaine looked at him closely. *That’s odd. He must have anticipated this possibility. Why is he acting so strange; so unprepared? I need to talk to Rich about this.*

She took Eli’s hand and together they went upstairs so Eli could try on her new swimsuit. Oskar and Papa followed quietly behind, but instead of going inside, Papa sat on the porch swing. Oskar hesitated for a moment, then sat down beside him.

“What do you think Oskar? Are you satisfied? Do you have any reservations?”

“No Dad. No reservations. But she’s really, really pretty isn’t she? And her wings really are awesome! They’re even bigger than before. I guess it’s because she’s almost two years older now.”

“Yes Oskar, she is pretty. She’s a young woman now, you know. It won’t be long until you’re both adults.”

“I know, Dad. Mom and I had a long talk about...things this morning. She said what we do and where we sleep from now on is up to us,” he paused, “as long as we wear pajamas. But she was sort of kidding about the pajamas, I think.”

“I know, Oskar. We’ve discussed it at length, and feel that you’ve aged enough to understand the responsibilities that go along with your increasing physical and mental maturity. And Mom was your strongest advocate this time. It must have been something you said to her.” He knew his own talks with Elaine were largely about damage control, and trying to find them a safe path through the maze their physical relationship, driven by their love for each other, had already forced them to begin navigating. Elaine and he knew it was a losing battle, but the longer they could postpone the inevitable, the better. “At any rate, we’ve decided that it’s your and Eli’s responsibility now. But I’m sure that when you think about it, you’ll understand what Mom meant. About the pajamas, I mean. Part of what she meant was that you both need to be careful when you’re close not to let your passions get the best of you, as difficult as that assuredly is. Think about consequences and how such things might affect your relationship. Just...be very careful.”

“We will, Dad.” Oskar was pretty sure he actually did know what Mom had meant. And he realized he wasn’t embarrassed at all discussing this with Dad. *What does that mean*, he wondered. He also realized that he was fully capable now of understanding how it all fit into his love for Eli, yet getting this qualified permission from Mom and Dad wasn’t nearly as important to him as knowing that, as a result, they could now sleep together and just be together whenever and however they wanted to. No more having to ask for permission every time they felt lonely or sad or just really needed each other. That revelation surprised him, considering how much he had wanted sex before—and still did. But somehow, ever since he bathed her that magical night she pretended to be hibernating, he knew this was far more important...

“Dad? Why don’t you want wings for yourself?”

“I’m not sure, Oskar. I’ve dreamed about flying since I was a boy. Perhaps I’m afraid the reality won’t live up to the fantasy. Or perhaps it’s because I enjoyed flying with your mother so much, and I’ll lose the magic if I can do it on my own. Or perhaps I’m afraid it’ll adversely affect the dynamic between us; I’m not sure. And until I am, I’m waiting.”

“Me too, Dad. The funny thing is ...what you said scares me too. I’m afraid that wings and all that strength could affect our relationship somehow. All but two years of our life together, she’s been a vampire. I had gotten used to it; used to relying on her for certain things. I don’t know how to explain it, but becoming like Eli kind of scares me.”

Silly boy! Eli whispered to him. *Just think of all the fun we could have! I could chase you to wonderful places.*

“Do what you think is right, Oskar. I have complete confidence in you.” He put his arm around him.

“You too, Dad.” They sat there quietly for a while, not thinking; just breathing in the crisp ocean air and watching the birds along the near edge of the cliff circling endlessly in the sky.

Eli watched them through Oskar’s eyes for a while, then lay back on her bed, waiting patiently for him to come back upstairs so she could show him her new suit. She held out a clawed hand,

examined it closely next to her unchanged one, then watched as the long dark claws slowly morphed back into fingers. She stood up in the middle of the room, readjusted her backless one-piece bathing suit, and grew her wings. *Nice!* The contrast between the shimmering white suit and her velvety black wings was startling, to say the least. *I know Jonathan picked the color so he could track us in the dark more easily, but it really looks nice... Damn! I'm starting to think like a girl.* She shuddered, then shrugged her shoulders. She stepped back, stretched out her wings as far as she could, and examined the effect in the mirror. She smiled to herself as she felt Oskar coming up the stairs. She could hardly wait to show him. *I am what I am*, she thought.

§

“What’s this about, Jonathan? I thought we had covered everything in our meeting yesterday.” Dawson was puzzled, especially since Elaine had told him of his odd behavior earlier. Jonathan had brought them back to the lab unexpectedly, telling them there had been developments in the final formula that he felt compelled to discuss with them. Because of his own workload, Jack had left that aspect of the energy problem in Jonathan’s hands and hadn’t really spent the time examining the chemistry behind the mixture or any other aspect of it at all, other than suggesting that it be named “Elijuice” around the dinner table last night. As a result, he had been vigorously pummeled by Eli and Hannah, after which they had settled on ‘Ejuice’ after Eli, Elaine, and, of course, Energy.

“There’s something I haven’t told you about the Ejuice, Richard. Jack knows, at least in a rudimentary way, how many problems we had getting the mixture just right. The pseudo-vampire part of the digestive system resulting from the injection still requires the same components as before, but is nowhere near as invasive as the original. So in order to get this done in a timely manner, I was forced to take ... some might say, ‘drastic measures,’ in order to stay on schedule.”

“Why did you feel compelled to discuss this now?” Jack asked.

“Because I think there’s a strong possibility that Oskar, and at a minimum, Hannah, may not want to wait a few years for the wings. And I think that, in order for them to make a meaningful decision, they need to know the downside.”

“They already know that, in order to fly, they’ll need to make the mixture a major part of their diet. What else do they need to know? What haven’t you told us that would make a difference?” Dawson asked.

“Blood,” he said quietly. “The most active component of Ejuice, as least insofar as energy transfer is concerned, is blood.”

The room fell silent for a moment.

“Why didn’t you tell us? This changes everything. Perhaps not for Oskar, but for Hannah? Jason? Nils and Livia will never allow this for them and they may not want it for themselves.” Jack was angry. The thought of Hannah, of all people, as trusting as she was, not being told

something this important, infuriated him. Her hopes would be dashed in one fell swoop, a particularly devastating blow, since Eli had only agreed to contact Archaeogenetics in the first place because of the promise of Hannah's wings. "What were you thinking?! If they had gone through with this without knowing, how do you think Eli would feel, knowing that she had insisted on Hannah doing this? Eli doesn't know either! And Elaine certainly didn't before now!"

Elaine nodded in agreement.

He paced back and forth. "This changes almost everything! Our carefully-thought-out plans for the future, based on the idea that everyone could do this, are now rendered moot. Livia's concerns about the inequality of the haves and the have-nots are now valid. Where would all this blood come from?"

"I would never have allowed them to go through this without knowing, Jack. That's why I called this meeting. To decide how best to tell them."

"We should have told them the instant you made that choice. This is going to devastate her. And Eli."

"What's done is done, Jack," Dawson said. This was getting out of hand. "Jonathan, what are the prospects of replacing the blood component with something a bit less...controversial? Is it likely in the near-future? Months? Years?"

"Frankly, I don't know. All I know is that the blood portion of the mixture is completely consumed. It's never passed. Everything else is digested normally. So far, I've tried removing blood components one at a time, but the only part not necessary for the process seems to be the plasma. The necessary components from the plasma have been synthesized. But so far, the red and white cells need to be intact for the process to work at all, although the 'freshness' of the blood is not as critical as it was for the full-vampire digestive system. The shelf-life of Ejuice is about that of milk."

Elaine stood up and headed for the door, "I think we've talked enough. It's time to tell the others." Rich quickly caught up, and together, they headed swiftly across the lawn toward the house.

Chapter 17: Flight Instructions

“Genterapi Ltd. has been doing major research on synthetic blood. Perhaps we can coordinate with them and come up with a solution to the problem, Jack.” Jonathan hesitated, “Again, I apologize. I simply hadn’t taken the time to consider the ramifications of adding blood to the mixture. I knew it wouldn’t matter to Eli and....”

Jack cut him short. “I think that’s an excellent idea, Jonathan. After their flight tonight, we should start the ball rolling on that.” Jack blamed himself for this. He knew from past experience how single-minded Jonathan was. Fulfilling his father’s dream was all that mattered to him, damn the consequences to civilization, and apparently even to those close to Eli. He vowed he wouldn’t make the same mistake a second time. From now on, he’d monitor everything Jonathan did. He needed to talk to Richard to find out if he had the legal right to grant him permission to do that, since, as Eli’s parent, he was probably the executor during the period before Eli became of legal age. He had never read the provisions for the eventual transfer of both companies to Eli, but he knew the process had to be legally complicated, so he really couldn’t be sure of anything. “Are there any more surprises?”

“No, Jack. And I promise I’ll be more careful in the future, and give you official written updates and mods in a timely manner.”

§

Eli and Elaine stood patiently as Jonathan meticulously made his measurements and placed the sensors on their wings in their predetermined locations. Jack and Papa carefully adjusted the small backpacks containing the altimeters, wind-speed indicators and transmitters, while everyone stood around talking. Tall temporary pole lights lit the immediate area, with Eli and Elaine in the center of it all.

“Look how absolutely beautiful they are, Livia. Just imagine our Hannah standing there alongside Eli, with a set of wings just like that. Or Jason.”

“I can’t believe you’re still considering this after Elaine’s bit of news this afternoon. It’s one thing for Hannah to have to make this ‘Ejuice’ a part of her regular diet, but now?! Knowing that the number one ingredient is human blood? It simply isn’t going to happen. And when she’s 18, I’ll still try to talk her out of it. This is getting way out of hand. Let’s look at what this injection really means for a moment: Hannah would have super-strength; she’d be able to grow wings, claws, and probably fangs; she’d require blood on a regular basis in order to do all these things, and for all we know, she’d need it just to survive. Does all this sound familiar? She’d be more vampire than human. Only one crucial element is missing!

“I know, Livia, but just look at her! Look at her face! Could something that makes her that happy be that bad? You know Eli. You know what she’s like, what a wonderful child she is. Do you really think she’d embrace this so whole-heartedly if there were anything dark about it at all?”

“You mean other than drinking blood?” her voice was dripping with sarcasm. “Eli’s used to it. She drank blood for hundreds of years. She takes it for granted. I refuse to do so. Richard! Help me out here! Surely you must understand my concerns.”

“I do, Livia.” He carefully positioned the wind-speed sensor just above and behind Eli’s head, making sure it would remain unaffected by her hair, which Hannah had already put up in a tight bun. “On the one hand, hundreds of thousands of years of evolution have pretty much worked the kinks out of vampiric flight and aerodynamics, even if we haven’t quite figured out how it can possibly work; but then it took many, many years of research to figure out how hummingbirds fly, so I know it’s just a matter of time. But I suspect these things are not your main concern – at least not by themselves.” He cinched up the straps between Eli’s legs, making sure the pack was stable on her back. “Hannah is your daughter, and this is all foreign to everything in your experience—and it understandably concerns you, no matter how stable the science behind it obviously is. Your daughter’s safety is your prime concern. I understand and respect that. The one down side, and the one that obviously concerns you, is the Ejuice. But I suspect that even that problem will be solved soon.”

Livia folded her arms across her chest and looked at him suspiciously, “If I didn’t know better, I could easily come to the conclusion that you’re on Hannah’s side in this argument.”

“I would never take sides in your family’s arguments, unless specifically asked. I’m just presenting you with the facts so you can decide for yourselves.”

“What do you think, Richard?” Nils asked. “Do you consider it safe for someone who hasn’t experienced it before? Have you considered all the side-effects and psychological consequences of the children having to keep all this a secret from their friends, and how it could isolate them and make them feel ‘different’ from all the others? And most importantly, at least for Livia, the blood consumption.”

Richard looked at Livia questioningly. “Do you also want my opinion, Livia?”

“Of course, Richard. What DO you think? Regarding specifically, Hannah’s ability to handle this properly, and the physical and psychological consequences of being forced to drink human blood, possibly for the rest of her life.”

“Livia, I’ve lived for 13 years with a child who can fly and has superhuman strength. And I’m here to tell you that her remaining a 12-year-old child was the hardest problem to compensate for, even over her dietary needs. The flying was less than nothing. She didn’t do it in public, and used it to enhance her life when she wasn’t. And your children have both proven their maturity and strength of character more than once over the past year. I’d allow them both the right to make the decision right now, without hesitation. They’re both very strong-willed and self-confident and they’ve earned it. And you know how much Elaine and I love them both.”

He hesitated, “But I really do understand your concern about the Ejuice. The good news is, our tests have shown that if Eli were to stop using it, her abilities would simply go dormant. In other words, that part of her system would simply hibernate. Low food supply for a prolonged period

of time, or excessive trauma, is what causes vampires to hibernate after all, and those rules apparently still apply to both neural networks. The net result is that she would simply lose her powers, until she ... used the Ejuice again.” He realized he had almost used the term ‘fed’ again. A terrible choice of words, which would have certainly sent Livia over the top.

“But this is entirely your call, Livia. We’ll think no less of you, no matter what you decide,” Elaine hastily added.

“Thank you both for your candor – and your understanding, but I really think we should put this on hold for now. Once you have found a blood substitute, we’ll revisit it. It’s simply too much for me right now. I’m certainly not implying anything negative with respect to you or Eli, Elaine,” she added quickly, “This is just my, for want of better words, ‘personal failing’ if you will.”

Elaine took her hand. “No, Livia; it’s a mother’s natural concern for the safety and happiness of her children.”

“How on earth did you mask the flavor of the blood?” Nils asked, in a desperate attempt to change the subject. “Blood has a very strong, distinct flavor; salty and metallic. And neither Eli nor Elaine noticed it.”

“I did, Mr. Sandstrøm, but I didn’t even think it could be blood. I figured Jonathan would have told us if blood was in it...”

“As I should have, Eli. Again, I’m sorry.”

“Hannah, I’m so sorry! I really wanted this for you. I don’t understand why you’re not more upset. I would be devastated by it.” Eli put her arms around her.

“It’s okay Eli. It’s not the same as with you. I’ve never had them, so I don’t know what I’m missing. I can wait. Besides, you can still carry me, right Mom?”

Livia was wise enough to understand that she had just been outflanked. “Yes, Hannah. I guess I can’t refuse you that. But you’ll be careful with her won’t you Eli?”

“Of course I will! She’s my kindred spirit.” She took Hannah’s hand. “First thing tomorrow, we’ll fly to the caves.”

Jonathan looked at his watch. “We need to get this show on the road. Are you two ready? Jack?”

“Eli’s all set, Jonathan.” He looked down at the scale. “The entire package doesn’t weigh enough to cause any significant differences in their response times.” He jotted down her total weight next to Elaine’s.

“Let’s go then!” Jonathan nodded to Elaine, who flapped her wings a couple of times to make sure the sensors were firmly attached, then without hesitation, took off toward the back fence. Eli

followed quickly behind. Immediately, Jonathan disappeared through the open door of the warehouse and joined the others monitoring the flight. Within just a couple of minutes, even with the white suits on, they had vanished into the darkness.

“I’ll talk to you later, Doctor.” Jack slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

Hannah stared up into the night sky, trying to get a glimpse of them, until Oskar gently took her hand. They went on the flight together, and stayed with Eli until Jonathan was satisfied, then they started for home. Relieved, they sat together on the porch swing and waited.

“Oskar?”

“What?”

“I...I really hope you’ll decide to get the shot. I can’t, so it’s even more important that you do it. I don’t want Eli to be alone. You need to be with her.”

“How can you be so sure it’s the right thing to do, Hannah? You’re always so sure! I wish I could be like that.” After this second flight, most of Oskar’s reluctance had evaporated. And he knew Hannah was right; and he really wanted to be with Eli. But still...

“I don’t know, Oskar. I just am. Maybe it’s because I’m always right about the important things. And remember, I have the same DNA as Eli, even though we’re separated by over 200 years. And we both know you should do this. I’m even more sure than Eli is.”

Oskar took her hand in his and sighed. *Okay.*

“Okay? Does that mean you’ll do it?!” she squeezed his hand tighter.

“Yeah, but your being sure makes it easier, Hannah.” He put his arms around her and kissed her on the cheek. *My sweet Hannah. And to think I tried to talk Eli out of going that night she first met you. I’m so happy she didn’t follow my advice.*

They were still sitting there when Eli and Mama, tired but happy after their debriefing, walked out of the darkness up the steps, and sat down beside them. Eli realized instantly that Oskar had changed his mind.

“Oskar? Why don’t you do this now? Why wait?” Eli was excited. “I could get Papa...”

“You should do it Oskar! You don’t need to wait for us.” Hannah stood up and took him by the hand. “Let’s do it right now!” she dragged him down the steps.

“Hold on a minute! Oskar? I think you need to sleep on this. If you still feel the same way tomorrow, we’ll talk to your dad about it. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, Mom. I think that would be...best.” Oskar looked relieved.

“And I’m sure Jonathan isn’t going to agree to this without at least a modicum of preparation. So let’s just sit back, take a deep breath, and relax. Sorry Hannah.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Dawson. It was just a thought, but it was such an exciting one!”

Elaine put her arm around her. “Hannah, you have my solemn promise that you’ll be flying with Eli very soon. We’ll either find a blood substitute, or we’ll talk you mom into it.” She smiled and put her finger to her lips. “But don’t warn your mom that I’m going to be ambushing her.”

§

“Well Oskar? Do you think you’ll change your mind?” Eli sat on the edge of her bed, drying her hair.

Oskar sat down beside her, his towel over his shoulder. “No Eli, I don’t. Hannah finally talked me into it, and she’s really persuasive. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.” He hid a grin, wondering if she would take the bait.

She did.

“You mean you’d listen to Hannah over me? I’ve told you since the beginning that you should do it,” she pouted.

“Gotcha!” He grinned at her. “I just wanted to see if you’d be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous! Its’ just that...”

“Yup! You’re jealous. Admit it.” He grinned again as her eyes turned golden. “Come on Eli, fess up. You think I respect Hannah’s ideas more than I do yours. And sometimes...” his eyes sparkled.

She was on top of him before he had finished, golden eyes blazing. “I warned you what would happen after the Change, Oskar. I see you didn’t take me seriously. Perhaps I need to teach you a lesson now.” She easily pinned his arms to the bed.

Oskar thought fast. “Pajamas, Eli! Mom said you have to wear pajamas when we...you know.”

“I have to wear my pajamas when I beat you up? And what about you? You’re as naked as a Jay.” She swatted him on the rump. “What are you doing in my room naked? I’m going to tell Mama on you – after I beat you up.” She flipped him over, straddled him and pushed his arms back over his head.

“I never figured you for a tattletale Eli. I guess I’ll have to...” He lunged upright, and with all his might, tossed her off. She slid across the bed, her arms waving frantically over her head, and disappeared off the end, landing on the floor with a loud smack, flat on her back.

“Ooof! Oskar, be careful. You might have hurt me!”

“Super-strength, remember? You thought I forgot? You, on the other hand, obviously forgot that no matter how strong you are, you’re still light as a feather. That’s why you’re on the floor, and I’m still sitting on your bed. Leverage!”

“I’ll leverage you!” She scrambled after him, eyes blazing and fangs out.

Oskar screamed at the sight of her in spite of himself, then quickly dropped to the floor and slid under the bed.

Eli sat on the floor, planted her feet firmly against the bed frame, grabbed his bare foot and jerked him swiftly out from under the bed. “Leverage, Oskar!” She grabbed him around the waist, lifted him over her head and bounced him on her bed. “Leverage again, Oskar!” She pounced on him before he could move a muscle, wrapped her legs around him, and grabbed him by the shoulders. “What’cha gonna do now, Oskar? I think you’re about leveraged out.” She grinned down at him.

Oskar wrapped his arms around her neck, pulled her down and gave her a big, passionate kiss, right on the lips. She struggled for a minute, then relaxed and kissed him back. She slid down beside him and gently wrapped her arms around him. They lay there quietly for quite a bit longer than a few minutes, kissing each other and holding each other tight. Eli reached down and gently pulled her blanket up over them.

Finally, Oskar, breathing heavily, kissed her gently one last time, threw the blanket back and stumbled out of bed.

“Oskar? Where are you going?”

“To put my pajamas on,” he whispered, hoarsely.

§

They walked slowly down the stairs, hand in hand. They could smell breakfast cooking and hear the murmur of voices floating up the stairs. Oskar leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Let’s do this! I can hardly wait!” His mind was filled with visions of those beautiful caves and the white cliffs, and flying with Eli – most of all, just flying with Eli. Anywhere.

They sat down at the table. Jack and Jonathan were waiting for them. Hannah was there too, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “I already had breakfast, but I just had to come and watch!”

Jonathan was sitting at the head of the table, with an open bottle of Ejuice in front of him. He filled Oskar’s cup and handed it to him.

“I need to know you can do this, Oskar, before we proceed any further.”

Oskar took the cup, hesitated for just a moment, sniffed it, then drank it down decisively. It tasted like thick milk with strawberries; a little salty, but otherwise kind of pleasant. He was greatly relieved. "It tastes quite good, actually." He eyed the syringe laid out neatly on the stainless steel tray.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to do this, Oskar? There's certainly no hurry," Jack said.

He looked at Eli and smiled. "I'm sure."

"Okay, then." He plunged the syringe into Oskar's arm, then wrote the time down in his notebook. "Who's going to give you flying lessons, Oskar? Eli? Or your mom?"

"Why Mom, of course. She the best flyer...ouch! I mean Eli! Eli's going to teach me. Right Eli?" he grinned at her and rubbed his arm.

"I'll think about it, Oskar, but I'm pretty busy these days. You know, flying Hannah around is pretty time-consuming, but I'll try to work you in." she handed him a gift-wrapped box.

"What's this?" He tore off the paper, closed his eyes, and blindly reached into the box.

"What are you doing Oskar?"

"When I was little, and my Mom handed me my first Birthday present each year, I would close my eyes before I opened it, because she always gave me the best one first." He opened his eyes and pulled out a shiny white bathing suit.

Eli grinned at him. "Not exactly what you were expecting, huh?"

"Better, Eli. It'll be the first time you and I have had matching outfits."

Hannah leaped up and put her arms around his neck, "Now I have two fairies who can carry me away with them!" she kissed him on the cheek. "You don't mind if I call you a fairy, do you Oskar?"

"You can call me whatever you want here, Hannah. But not in school, please." He grinned at her. "But I promise, you'll be my very first passenger."

"Oskar? Come with me." Jonathan stood up and headed for the door.

Jack stood up and squeezed Oskar's shoulder. "Go ahead, Oskar. He's concerned because you'll be the first to get wings who hasn't had them before. He has a series of tests he wants to run on you during the next 12 hours or so, just to make sure everything goes as expected."

"Jack? When are you going to get wings? Soon, I hope!" Hannah put her arm through his.

“Actually, I was thinking about that very thing, Hannah. Jonathan has been a bit impatient with these two ‘non-scientists’ making the experience into something mystical and romantic. He wants a level-headed, no-nonsense scientist to go through this for a more balanced perspective, and he just naturally picked me.” he grinned at her.

“But that’s not you, Jack! You’re not a boring ...”

“Shhh, Hannah. Let’s not tell him I’m secretly a hopeless romantic. How could I have fallen in love with Eli so long ago if I weren’t?” He winked at her, then leaned down and whispered in her ear, “And if I have any say in it, pixie, you’ll be the next to get your wings. You’ve earned them. After all, brave fairy princesses have to have wings. It’s a job requirement.”

Hannah felt all warm and fuzzy. She squeezed his arm tightly. *He’s so very sweet and kind. And he always says the nicest things to me. It’s like he knows exactly what I’m thinking.*

“Jack? I could teach you how to fly too, if you want.” Eli offered. “It’ll make us even, since you taught me the backstroke when you were 13.”

“Hey, that’s right! You owe me big time. I accept your offer!”

§

“Oskar? How do you feel? It’s almost 9 o’clock.”

“Kind of...light, Eli! Like I think it would feel to walk on the moon. Is that how I should feel?”

“I don’t know Oskar...unless it’s because you’re strong now. And after all, it’s been 12 hours; Jonathan and Jack are coming.” Eli suddenly realized she could hear again. *Why did that take so long? It’s been almost two days now.* “Oskar, I think I have my ears back! Jonathan didn’t tell me that would happen. I wonder if he knows. “Let go, Oskar. He’ll want to see if you can grow your wings now. They hurried down the stairs to the kitchen, where Jonathan had just finished putting several bottles of Ejuice on the table.

“Oskar, I think you need to drink as much of this as you can, and a little more after that. Our data showed a subtle loss of strength in Eli near the end of their flight last night, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

Oskar had no trouble with the first bottle, but the second took him several minutes. And the third he could hardly begin. It was beginning to taste a bit...disgusting. “That’s it! I can’t drink any more!” He sat back in his chair, feeling a bit bloated.

“That’s okay, Oskar. We’re not planning on any long flights tonight. We just want to make sure you can grow and use them at all. Let’s go outside.” Jonathan stood up and disappeared out the door, with the others close behind him. Hannah was already waiting on the porch swing.

Oskar stood there for a second, then, “What do I do now? How do I do this?” He pressed his arms tightly against his sides, then slowly raised them. Nothing happened. “Eli? How do I do it? Show me.”

“You just sort of...think them. I don’t know, Oskar. It’s been so long, I can’t remember exactly. Watch me.” She put her arms to her sides, then raised them slowly. With a soft crackle, her wing lattice formed and filled in quickly. The wings were perfectly formed by the time her arms were over her head.

Oskar mimicked her exactly, but still nothing happened. “I thought about them, Eli. I really did, but I just don’t get it. Maybe it didn’t work. Maybe the shot didn’t work on me.”

“Squeeze my hand, Oskar.” Jack stuck his hand out. “But be careful...ouch! Easy there!” He pulled his hand away and shook it. “It worked, Oskar; take my word for it.”

“But...then why can’t I do it?” he was getting frustrated.

Eli thought back to her first time, the time she stood on the edge of the cliff, starving, and watched the squeaking bats fly randomly back and forth over her head into swarms of insects. She relived it vividly in her mind: she felt herself lean over the cliff, arms at her sides and fall, at the same time she smoothly raised her arms over her head. And they were just...there. It was so natural to her even then; it just happened reflexively. “Maybe if you stood up on the edge of the porch and fell forward. It’s only a meter high. You wouldn’t hurt yourself if you fell.”

Reluctantly, Oskar stepped to the edge of the porch, put his arms to his sides, leaned forward cautiously and toppled over. Reflexively, his arms shot forward and he fell like a stone, landing flat on his face in the flowerbed. Embarrassed, he scrambled to his feet while Eli and Hannah giggled. “It’s not funny! I simply can’t do it Eli. What’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know Oskar. Maybe you’re not hungry enough. I was pretty hungry that first time.” Eli knew he was upset, but couldn’t think of a thing that would help at this point. And it *had* been pretty funny. She hid a smile.

“But if I was hungry, I couldn’t do it either, because I wouldn’t have the strength.” He sat down on the steps, frustrated. Eli sat down beside him.

“Watch me one more time, Oskar. Only watch really close this time.” She stood in front of him, put her arms to her sides, and held them there for a second. Before she even began to raise them, Oskar saw the web form between her arms and sides. It just sort of slid out of her skin from the inside of her arms and from her sides, and met in the gaps between them. Small knobs formed; one at each elbow and two at each wrist, where he realized the bone spars would begin to grow the instant she moved her arms.

“Eli, I can’t even do that!” He stood up in front of her with his arms at his sides and thought furiously; to no avail. He got nothing.

“Perhaps you’re trying too hard,” Jack offered. “Why don’t you try out your strength in the meantime? Eli? Start running. See if he can catch you.”

She grinned at Oskar, “That’ll be the day! He couldn’t catch me before my injection.” She stuck her tongue out at him and started off at a fast trot across the huge lawn toward the back fence. Oskar lunged for her, missed, and took off after her. Hannah gasped as they both picked up speed, and their strides increased to at least 2 meters. Oskar actually seemed to be gaining on her when Eli finally reached the back fence.

“I win! As usual,” she teased. She grabbed him and gave him a big kiss. “Let’s race back! Whoever loses has to make our beds for a week!” She took off, but he was right behind her this time, with a new confidence. He had realized right away that he had actually been closing the gap toward the end. She only won because he delayed at the start too long. Once again, he gained on her, and before they were half-way back, he could almost reach out and touch her, he was so close. She glanced behind her, grinned at him, then lunged forward, arms at her sides, grew her wings and took off, flying no more than four feet above the ground.

“That’s not fair!!” he shouted. He couldn’t believe that Eli would rub his nose in his failure like that. Totally frustrated and angry, he lunged for her, and to his astonishment, he actually began gaining on her once again.

But, he realized suddenly, it was only because he was flying too! He looked down as the ground receded beneath him and suddenly he was above her—then in front of her. He could hear whistles and applause coming from the direction of the house, then looked behind him as Eli fought furiously to catch up, but to no avail. He was 10 meters ahead of her when he finally realized he didn’t know how to stop. The porch approached swiftly and Hannah’s face, mouth wide open, got bigger and bigger, until suddenly, he got it. His feet dropped down, he instinctively flapped his wings forward, stalled out perfectly and landed softly, stumbling a bit, but at least remaining upright.

Eli gracefully touched down beside him a second later. “You looked like an Albatross landing,” she teased. She was grinning ear-to-ear.

“Well, the Albatross won the race, didn’t he?” He felt his arms and sides tingle as his wings retracted. “How cool is that?!!”

“Grow them again, Oskar! I want to see.” Hannah crouched down and rubbed his side with her fingers. “There’s nothing there! How did you do that?!”

“I honestly don’t know, Hannah. It just...happened. Let’s see...” He put his arms to his sides and closed his eyes. Sure enough; the webbing began to form and, as he slowly raised his arms, the spars extended themselves until his wings were totally formed and velvety black. “They’re even bigger than Eli’s!” Hannah exclaimed. “Oskar, with your blond hair and beautiful blue eyes, you really look like a fairy. And I should know. I have lots of books about fairies.”

“Why am I not surprised?” he grinned at her. “Eli, would you teach me how to fly now? I really want to do this. Will you?”

“I think that better be it for tonight, Oskar. Eli can teach you tomorrow—in the daylight. It’ll be safer. But always remember to check the maintenance schedule for the lighthouse. We wouldn’t want to startle anyone, especially an innocent, underpaid government employee.” Jonathan turned off the recording equipment, and aided by his assistants, gathered everything up and carried it back into the warehouse.

§

Eli stood in the middle of her room in her pajamas. “Come on Oskar! It’s 11! Let’s go to bed.

“Come here, Eli. I need some help in here,” he called out from his room. She quickly hurried across the hall.

“What, Oskar?” she stopped as soon as she saw him. He was standing in front of his unmade bed with his arms folded across his chest.

“Well?” he tapped his foot impatiently.

“Why is your bed unmade Oskar? You slept in my room last night,” she eyed him suspiciously.

“Hmm. That’s right, I did. Well, I simply can’t explain it, Eli. Perhaps I forgot to make it the night before.”

“We slept in my bed that night too.” She said sullenly. “In fact, we’ve slept in my bed every night since we got here. You’ve never slept in your bed!!”

“You know, I think you’re right, Eli. It’s a complete mystery to me. But a deal is a deal.” He stepped back from the bed and waited.

“Okay, I’ll do it. But not with you watching with that smug look on your face. Get out of here!”

“I’ll wait in your room. But I’ll want to check it when you’re done. I expect it to be up to my high standards. If it’s not done right, I’ll expect you to redo it.”

Eli thought really dark thoughts as he strode smugly across the hall and closed her door behind him.

She went immediately to work on his bed, grumbling to herself. Among other things, it drove home to her how much she hated to lose. She simply had to get even. It was absolutely essential...

“Oskar!!!”

Oskar opened her door and peeked out. “You don’t have to yell, you know. Is it ready?”

“Would I have called you if it weren’t?”

He walked around the bed slowly, arms behind his back, examining every crease, stopping to center his pillow and fluff it a bit.

“Well? Does it meet with His Highness’s approval?”

“Boy, are you a sore loser! But I have to admit, it’s almost perfect. I’d give it a B plus.”

“What do you mean, almost perfect?! You’ve never done it this well!”

“True; but then I didn’t lose a foot-race even after cheating. And don’t look at me with those...eyes. You can’t scare me anymore, remember? I’m as strong as you now.”

Eli grew the longest fangs she could and took a step toward him on her huge clawed feet.

“Ewww! Please don’t. That’s simply disgusting! And I promise! I really don’t want to learn how to do that.” She had actually scared the hell out of him, but he certainly wasn’t going to let on. He absolutely couldn’t. Not this time.

She glared at him for a moment, then turned, stormed into her room and slammed the door shut behind her. “You’re no fun anymore, Oskar,” she yelled through the door.

Oops! Maybe I went too far this time. I think she’s really mad at me. Oskar was simply not used to winning a fight with Eli; or anyone else, for that matter. And it was hard for him to really understand that he had actually, after all these years, really done it.

I probably hurt her feelings. I’ll go over and apologize. He tried her door, but it was locked. “Eli?” He was about to say more, but the devil in him took over. No, this was her fault. She had brought this on herself. She needed to apologize to him.

He felt better than he had in years, he realized. He had finally won one. He took his clothes off, put on his pajamas and climbed into bed. *She can just come to me this time. I’m tired of always being the peace-maker.* One last time, he cautiously reached out to her in his mind. Nothing. She was shut down just as tight as he was. He shrugged his shoulders, stretched out...and felt something wet and sticky at exactly the same instant he realized he had been short-sheeted. He leaped out of bed, covered with sticky pink...glop of some sort. The strong odor of strawberries and raspberries filled the room. He frantically stripped off his pajamas when he realized what it had to be. “Damn it, damn it!” He heard a sound, turned, and there she was, arms folded across her chest, leaning against his door jam, a sadistic smile on her face.

His sudden rage carried him swiftly across the room and he had her, before she could blink an eye. *She got me again!! How does she do that? Every—single—time.* He throttled her, knowing

he wouldn't be able to hurt her, but boy, he had to admit; it sure felt good! But no matter how hard he tried, he simply couldn't wipe the grin off her face.

Finally, he angrily grabbed her in a tight bear-hug, carried her into the bathroom, stepped into the tub, and reached for the shower handle. She hadn't resisted at all, he suddenly realized.

"Oskar? These are my new pajamas. Let me take them off first."

"Nope! We can't be together any more without at least one of us in our pajamas." He'd show her! His rage was unabated.

"Oskar! Please?" She batted her pixie eyes at him.

He sighed, then let go of her and just sort of...stood there, looking down at his feet as his rage, despite all his attempts to stop it, drifted quietly away. *And there it goes again*, he thought to himself, furious at his lack of resolve, and at how easy it was for her to manipulate him.

"Oskar? What's wrong?" he could feel her trying to get into his mind.

"Go away, Eli! I need to take a shower." He turned around and reached for the handle. "I'll wait until you get out," he said quietly.

"Oskar? Did I hurt your feelings?"

"Please, Eli. Just...get out."

She looked at him intently for a minute, then stepped out of the tub. He closed the curtain and turned on the water.

He stayed in there for a long time after cleaning himself off, just letting the water run over his head and down his chest and back. He made it so hot he could scarcely bear it, but it felt therapeutic to him. It almost made him forget what he hated the most about himself; that he could never sustain his anger long enough for it to do him any good. Only once had he ever done it, and it had almost ended very badly for them all. And it hadn't been about him in any case; it had been about Eli and protecting her from Seth. *How is it that some people can get away with being angry, rude, and aggressive almost every day, with great success, and I can't even do it long enough to get respect, even from people I care about? I've always been at the bottom of the food chain, kind of like a dumb rabbit or something, afraid of my own shadow. No guts! A follower, not a leader. A wimp, no matter what Dad says. I can NEVER stand up for myself, even when it's important. And, most of the time, I'm not even sure when it IS important.*

He turned the water off and stepped out of the tub, desperately hoping that Eli would be gone.

She was. But even though it was what he wanted, he still felt a twinge of regret; regret that he had told her to leave. *Stupid, stupid! You can't have it both ways*, he admonished himself. He grabbed a couple of sheets and some towels from the linen closet and slipped quietly into his

room, definitely not looking forward to cleaning up the mess. He was very tired, and very depressed. And he absolutely couldn't go to Eli's room tonight.

He eyed his bed suspiciously. It was already made. His Ejuice-soaked pajamas were gone and the floor was clean. *Damn! She's done it again!* He cautiously pulled the blanket back with two fingers. Nothing. Not short-sheeted. He carefully slid his hand under the top sheet. Nothing there either. On a hunch, he checked his pillow, taking it completely out of the pillowcase and turning it over in his hands. He still remembered that time at summer camp when one of the kids had filled his pillowcase with shaving cream. Again, nothing. He put on his clean pajamas and sat down on his bed for a moment. He decided he didn't have the energy to try and figure out what was going on.

Resignedly, he slipped his feet under the covers, explored the foot of the bed with his toes, then slid entirely into bed and lay back on his pillow, hands behind his head, trying not to think about anything at all. But he knew with a deep certainty now, that no matter how hard he tried, he would never be able to change his nature; he would just have to learn to live with his handicap.

He felt Eli slide into bed next to him.

"Please, Eli; not now. I...I can't..."

"I'm sorry, Oskar."

He couldn't think of anything to say. He felt her trying again to get into his mind, but he just couldn't let her in right now. What good would it do? The problem had no solution.

"Please Oskar. Talk to me. I'm really, really sorry!" And he could see that she was. He could feel that she was.

"Oskar, this is all my fault! I really hate to lose at anything. I simply can't stand it! And I've been that way all my life, even before I was turned. I gave up trying to change myself over two hundred years ago. And of course it didn't matter then. But it matters now. I can't lose you!"

"You won't lose me, Eli. Ever. I just don't...like myself very much right now. And that makes it even harder than usual for me to understand why you like me. How could you possibly like someone like me?" And he let her in, knowing that she would finally see him the way he saw himself, but what the hell; it had to happen sooner or later.

"What? What am I supposed to see, Oskar?" he could feel her love pour into him, and realized suddenly that what she loved most about him was what he thought he hated. "Oskar, if everyone in the world were like you, we wouldn't have wars. If it was as hard for everyone to stay angry as it is for you, all that would happen is there would be a lot of yelling." She kissed him on the cheek. "I promise, Oskar. I'll change. No matter how hard it is."

"No! I like you just as you are! You wouldn't be any fun if you weren't like...that. I love when you're like that—usually. You're...spunky!"

“Spunky?! What a wimpy word. You must mean ‘strong-willed’ and ‘forceful.’” She grinned at him.

“No, that’s Mom. You’re spunky,” he insisted.

“Well, I guess it’s settled then. What we like about each other is what we hate about ourselves.” She thought a moment. “No, that’s not it. What we hate about ourselves is what the other one likes the most about us; I mean the other.” She looked confused.

“Stop! It’s in there somewhere, Eli, and I don’t feel like fishing it out.” He pulled her up against him and kissed her on the cheek. “By the way, you get an ‘A’ on the bed. Nicely done!”

“Just an ‘A’? Not an ‘A+’?”

“Nope! I can still smell Raspberries.”

Eli giggled “You’ve got to admit, I really got you good!”

Oskar sighed, “Yeah, you really did.”

Chapter 18: Flight of the Phoenix.

“Don’t try so hard Oskar. Just relax and let the updraft lift you up!” Eli hung in the air, wings motionless. Oskar continued flapping his wings, trying to maintain altitude, but he kept sinking below and behind her. “No, no! You aren’t keeping your first wrist spar parallel to your arm. Can’t you just feel how...wrong that is? And don’t bend your elbows! It makes you look like a flying squirrel...there! Now you’ve got it!”

Oskar quickly rose up beside her, his own wings motionless. “It’s so hard, Eli. I don’t see how you can remember it all.”

“I’m lazy, Oskar. And it’s just so much easier to fly with your arms straight like that. Jonathan says it’s because it increases the effective surface area of your wings when you do that. And it tightens up the wings so they don’t lose energy when you flap them. Something about the air spilling out from under them instead of providing ‘lift,’ I think. Mama says she’s just ‘trimming her wings’ when she does it. She taught me a lot of this. I almost had it all by myself, but she showed me some stuff that makes it even easier.”

She looked down at the runway just as the plane was preparing for takeoff. “Mama says she’ll be back day after tomorrow. She, Jonathan, and Hannah’s papa are going back to sign papers; then he’ll be working for me,” she joked.

“I know, Eli. She just told me they’d be back sometime Thursday afternoon.” He paused. “She told me to tell you not to work him too hard. He’s very young you know.”

She laughed, then slipped quietly out of the updraft and circled down in a lazy spiral toward the forest. Oskar, after stalling out a couple of times, finally caught up with her. Eli pretended she hadn’t noticed.

“See that clearing down there on the edge of the forest? That’s where I’d like to build our house. It’s near the edge of the hill, and you can see the whole harbor and the compound from there. Let’s go look.” She gracefully leaned forward, then peeled off into a steep dive. Oskar scrambled to keep up.

§

They stood together in the expanse of tall grass, looking down on the compound across the harbor. From here, they could see all three houses lined up in a neat row. “Whose boat is that?” Oskar asked. A 15-meter yacht was anchored in the shallow, southern end of the harbor, opposite the compound.

“It belongs to Archaeogenetics. They use it sometimes when the weather is bad and planes can’t land, but Jonathan says it’s mainly for fun. It’s very fast, he says.”

Oskar nodded toward the compound. “Eli, we already have a house. Why do you want another one?”

“Not another one, Oskar; a different one. I think we should give that one to Hannah. I want to build my own house – our own house.” As grateful as she was, she somehow didn’t like the idea of Gudmund building their house for them even before they were married or anything. It sort of locked them in. They couldn’t plan their own, unfettered future.

Oskar read her. “But you’re already ‘fettered’ with me, Eli. And with Mom and Dad. And everyone else.”

“But I want all of you in my future! The island is new to us – and mysterious and beautiful. I don’t want anyone ‘narrowing our options’ as Papa would say.”

He put his arm around her, feeling her excitement. “I really do like it here, Eli. I think it would be a wonderful place for a house. Jack said the wind is generally from the southwest in the winter so it would be really calm here. And it would be especially nice here if we...you know...if we had...kids. Just imagine what fun we could all have here.”

They stood there a while, lost in the future. Eli looked at the ancient, weathered cliffs and the rounded boulders; rounded, she knew, by thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of years of wind, rain, and freezing temperatures. They reeked of oldness. Finally, she found herself thinking about the distant future, a time so far away that this island might even have sunk back into the ocean, and the world as she knew it would be completely, unimaginably different. Would she and Oskar still be alive? Mama? Papa? It frightened her somehow, because she knew the odds were against them all surviving that long. Papa had explained it to her, and the cold, hard reality of it had been with her ever since. ‘Nothing lasts forever’ he had told her and, she supposed, that meant her happiness too. She found herself hoping that, when that time came, maybe they would all die at exactly the same instant, so none of them would ever have to experience the pain, isolation and loneliness she had endured for so long before Oskar came into her life. She shuddered, and shook it off.

“Oskar, let’s fly over by the caves. There’s a huge hole in the cliff next to the lighthouse that’s so big we can fly right through it. And some of the neatest caves are near there on the sea side of the hill, right below the lighthouse.” She unfurled her wings and shook them out. They flew low over the meadow and rose up over the trees to the south. The lighthouse, which stood at the end of a stubby peninsula, precariously perched high atop a massive rock knob over 50 meters high, swung into view almost immediately.

“The helicopter came and left early this morning, and another isn’t scheduled for a couple of days. We have the whole island to ourselves, Oskar.” She dove down over the lighthouse, circled it twice, then shot under the delicate stone arch like a bullet, climbing steeply as soon as she had safely cleared it.



Oskar, a bit less aggressively, followed behind her and nervously dipped down under the arch. When he pulled up successfully on the other side, his euphoria had taken over completely. *Let's do it again, Eli!*

Over and over again, they threaded the needle, Oskar's confidence growing with each attempt. Finally, he was even able to keep up with her, and a few times, even beat her through. Then they began flying through it together, one above the other, until finally they'd had enough.

Watch this, Oskar! Eli swung out over the ocean, then drifted slowly down the face of the south cliff, half flying, half hovering until a dark slanted crack in the cliff wall opened out, revealing a huge cave with a grass-covered lip. She settled gently on the edge, retracted her wings and disappeared into the darkness of the cave opening.

Oskar, more cautious, descended down the face of the cliff clumsily and a bit painfully, occasionally brushing his wingtips against the sharp rocks, until he reached the entrance. Finally after much maneuvering, he gave up and threw himself onto the lip, wings extended, where he landed flat on his face in the grass. He stood up, embarrassed, retracted his wings and brushed himself off.

Eli fought the urge to laugh, but was unsuccessful. Oskar scowled at her, then followed her into the cave, marveling at the immensity of it all and wondering what sort of cataclysm had created it so long ago. Over the centuries, debris had filled the huge, diagonal crack, creating an almost perfectly level floor that extended back into the darkness as far as they could see.

“Look here, Oskar! There are drawings on the cave walls!”

There were literally hundreds of them on both walls, extending over 10 meters back into the darkness. There were bison, bears, bearded goats, and horned deer of some kind, but the most spectacular was an entire 2-meter section of colorful dancing women in a sort of conga line. Below them were what appeared to be close-ups of women’s genitalia.

“Wow!” Oskar exclaimed. “Ancient pornography!”

Eli giggled. “How come there are never pictures of men’s ‘privates’ on cave walls? It always seems to be women’s.” She thought about it a minute. “It’s probably because men did all the painting.”

“I think it’s because men’s ‘privates’ aren’t as interesting to women, as women’s ‘privates’ are to men,” Oskar mused.

“You’ve definitely got that right, Oskar.” Eli shuddered.

“Maybe the men’s conga line is further back in the cave, Eli.” Oskar teased. “You stay here while I check it out. I wouldn’t want to offend your sensibilities.”

He started back, but Eli grabbed him by the shoulder. “No chance, Oskar. I’m going first.”

“Nope! I insist!” He pushed past her, but she grabbed him in a tight bear hug. He spun free and ran, with Eli right behind him.

Almost instantly, the floor dropped out from under them and they both fell into the darkness.

§

“Ouch! Damn it!” Marcus stuck his smashed finger in his mouth. What had started out as a minor repair and replacement job had escalated into a major pain in the ass. He sat back on the floor, surrounded by corroded battery cables and old batteries, waiting for the pain to subside. All he was supposed to do was replace one bank of old batteries with new ones, handle the rats and a bit of minor damage, and have the others on the pad when the helicopter returned in two days. The job had evolved into a nightmare: The rats had chewed the insulation off over half the old connecting cables and peed everywhere, corroding not only the terminals, but the battery racks themselves every place an exposed copper cable had shorted to ground. The place stunk of rat urine and metal oxides. The old fan he had placed in the doorway was almost useless. He slammed down the hammer in disgust and stepped out into the hall.

“To hell with it! I’m taking a break,” he shouted to no one in particular. He was kind of happy he was alone. He worked much better when he could vent and not have to worry about whether or not he would offend anyone. His dad had been an ironworker, and never paid much attention to who was around when he swore. *Like father, like son*, he thought to himself. But his newly-

acquired government job had kind of put a damper on that sort of behavior. That's why he liked these loner assignments.

He stepped into the small elevator, pressed the button and leaned back against the wall, as the cage jerked and swayed its way up the side of the cliff in its ugly brick silo.

He took a deep breath of fresh air as he stepped out into the well-lit windowed passageway between the elevator and the lighthouse. Two of the eight massive batteries were already outside next to the pad. He knew now he was going to have a long two days ahead of him.

"God damn it!" He stalked into the lighthouse, grabbed his binoculars and a couple of beers, and headed up the stairs to the dome.

Finally, a bit out of breath, he stepped out on the deck and plopped down on an old folding chair he had brought out when he arrived, back when he thought he was going to have a lot of time to relax up here. He turned suddenly as he heard the sound of wings just below the deck, but he saw nothing. *That one was really close!* he thought to himself. He was a bit surprised, because he knew the larger Gannets and Cormorants seldom flew near the lighthouse; they normally hung out just above the top of the near cliff to the south, past the solar array. The wind mobiles the folks on the island had placed randomly among the panels seemed to keep them away; otherwise they'd have to clean them at least once a week. He trained his binoculars on the Needle's Eye for a moment, then just as he lowered them, he saw a huge bird, white with black wings, fly swiftly through the eye, bank to the right, and disappear behind the cliff. No sooner had he turned away from the first one, when another one exactly duplicated the trajectory and in turn disappeared behind the cliff. *Bloody Hell! They were huge!* He had never seen anything like it before. He kept his binoculars trained on the cliffs, hoping to catch them as they passed the end of the rock outcropping, but they never reappeared. *Perhaps they're roosting on the cliff face.* He knew there were many caves there, just as on the southwest cliffs, but most were inaccessible, and only a couple could have accommodated birds of that size.

He moved the chair over a bit to get a better view of the Needle's Eye and sat down...just as one of them again shot through the eye, banked to the left this time and climbed rapidly out of sight. He leaped up, grabbed his binoculars and trained them on the eye. Sure enough: the second one followed quickly behind and...he gasped, then desperately tried to follow it with the binoculars, but it moved too fast for him to follow effectively. The image bounced back and forth as he kept trying to keep it centered, but one thing was certain to him; it wasn't a bird. It was a small person, or a child. With blond hair. And black wings. And wearing what looked like a white bathing suit. He felt dizzy and sat down abruptly, still keeping his eye on the approximate place where they had disappeared from sight.

He rushed down to his room, pulled out his camera, and clambered back up the stairs to the dome. He stumbled out on the deck just as the two once again hurled themselves through the eye. Quickly, he crouched low on the deck, steadied the binoculars on the ledge, and waited. He didn't want to take the chance that they might see him. This time, they flew through the eye together, one above the other. *A boy and a girl; probably not adults.* He thought he could tell, not only by the long black hair of the girl and her general shape, a bit more petite than the boy, but

also by her clothing – a one-piece, respectable-looking woman’s bathing suit. These were people, not birds. And not some sort of magical creatures he had conjured up in his mind, or why would they be wearing what appeared to be clothing that reminded him of contemporary bathing suits? No, they were as real as he was.

He set his camera firmly on the ledge, checked the viewfinder, cranked up the shutter speed and waited.

This time, he saw them coming. They had gone to the right behind the cliff, had circled low past the outbuildings below the elevator, and only then rose up where he could see them again. He held his breath, and snapped the picture just as they cleared the eye. *Got ‘em!* He was sure he had gotten a perfect shot. He hurriedly advanced the film and got ready again, waiting for them to rise up behind the lighthouse.

Nothing happened. But he knew he couldn’t have missed them, now that he knew where to look. Where were they? He looked over the solar array toward the cliff’s edge as a half-dozen startled Gannets suddenly rose up and flew away toward the southwestern cliffs.

They must have stopped on the cliff wall or in a cave!

He waited a few minutes to be sure they didn’t reemerge, then hurried down the stairs and out the door. He threaded his way through the solar array and cautiously peered over the cliff. He saw nothing, but he was certain he could hear a child’s laughter. He lay down on his stomach, held his camera out over the cliff as far as he could, and snapped a couple of blind pictures. Then, he waited patiently. He suddenly had all the time in the world.

§

“Oskar? Are you okay?”

Oskar groaned, “I think so, Eli, but I landed on my ankle. It really hurts!”

“Let me see, Oskar!” She reached over and felt his foot.

“Ouch! Take it easy!”

“Wow! I think it’s broken, Oskar. Here let me...”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch! Eli, what are you doing?” he tried to snatch his foot away, but she held it steady in an iron grip.

“Be quiet, Oskar! I’m straightening it out so it can heal itself.” She looked at it closely. “See? It’s already started.”

“God! It really hurts, Eli. Did it hurt that much when the moose broke your arm and you reset it?”

“Probably a lot more, Oskar, but I don’t remember, and it doesn’t matter. You get used to...things.” She coughed. Then coughed again. Then she felt the pain.

Oskar looked down and saw the blood spatter on his chest. “Eli! Hold still! Don’t move,” he screamed.

In the dim light, he could see a long, sharp, dirty-white bone protruding almost ten centimeters from her right chest, just below her collarbone. He quickly scrambled to his knees, put his hand behind her back, and guided her gently down on her side. “Is...is that yours?” He was horrified.

She coughed again and closed her eyes. He frantically felt her back, and found a knob of bone protruding from it.

“Does it look like mine, Oskar?” she said sarcastically. “I think it’s even older than I am.” She winced, then reached up and tried to grab his hand, but couldn’t find it.

He sobbed, grabbed her hand and squeezed it. *I have to calm down!* “What should I do Eli?”

“You have to take it out, Oskar. I...can’t do it myself this time. And you’ll have to pull really hard.”

“Okay, Eli.” He carefully positioned himself behind her, grabbed the protruding knob firmly in his hand, braced his other hand on her shoulder and pulled. She groaned, but it didn’t budge.

“Harder, Oskar. You need to pull harder.” She coughed again. He could see bloody froth bubbling out around the knob each time she breathed. The bone had clearly pierced her lung. With all his might, he pulled again. She screamed in agony as he fell back on the cave floor with the bone in his hand. He tossed it away, heard it clatter against other bones in the darkness, then quickly grabbed her in his arms and covered both wounds with his hands. He remembered how Dad had pressed the towel against her chest at the lake, giving her body the time it needed to repair itself before she could bleed to death.

§

What the hell was that? Marcus leaned even further over the cliff, listening intently. One of them had screamed something. He hadn’t been able to make out the words, but the tone was unmistakable; panic and fear. He climbed down the side of the cliff a meter or two where the going was comparatively easy, and sat on a flat outcropping of rock. This was absolutely as far as he was willing to go. From here, he could at least hear the faint sound of voices – at least two of them. And not happy. *Are they in some sort of trouble?* He was having a difficult time understanding not only what he had seen, and now heard, but what it really meant. Were these...things even human? He hadn’t seen their faces clearly; just enough to see that they were human-like. Aliens? From another world? He hadn’t been able to make out any specific words either. An alien language of some sort? The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that they couldn’t be human. Humans simply can’t fly – at least not with wings.

The next scream almost made him lose his balance. *My God! It sounds like someone's dying!* It sounded like a child screaming in pain. For a brief moment, he thought of going for help. But the more he thought about it the less inclined he was to do so. *Maybe it wasn't a scream of pain. Maybe it's... what they do when they communicate with each other; like the screeching of birds. Maybe they're mating or something.* He thought about all the wild-life series he had seen on TV. Some of those rituals were pretty violent. And if an innocent animal happened upon them in the process, there was usually hell to pay. He suddenly felt very vulnerable. If they were to fly up the face of the cliff, he'd be defenseless. They could drag him off the cliff and no one would ever find his body. As big as they were, he might even be on their dinner menu. Some birds are raptors after all. He had learned that from the Jurassic Park films. He didn't believe in the supernatural, but he sure believed in the possibility of alien invasion. And they had looked pretty damned alien to him.

Still, his curiosity kept him huddled there, at least for the moment.

§

"Does it still hurt, Eli?" Oskar gently ran his fingers over the red spot just below her collarbone.

"Not so much." She placed her hand on top of his. "Thanks, Oskar." She lay for a few minutes with her head in his lap, then reluctantly stood up, took measure of the hole they had fallen into, and breathed a sigh of relief. "We can climb out over here, Oskar. It's only about seven meters deep. We were lucky." She scrambled up the side of the pit and was over the top before Oskar had even started. He moved more slowly and cautiously, still unfamiliar with his new capabilities and not feeling too chipper anyway; his ankle still bothered him. She grabbed his hand and helped him over the edge into the relative brightness of the cave.

"My God, Eli! You look awful! Like the walking dead!" Her hair was matted with blood and caked with dirt, and her beautiful white swimsuit was torn and bloody.

"Thanks, Oskar! You look bloody awful yourself!" she grinned at him.

"Yeah, but it's all your blood, Eli." he was really worried about her. They were both covered with blood and he knew she had left quite a bit in the pit. "Are you strong enough to fly home? Maybe we should..."

"What, Oskar? Get Mama? She's gone, remember? No, we got ourselves into this mess. We'll fly home, sneak in and clean ourselves up, and hope they never find out what fools we've made of ourselves." She looked down at her feet. "And I don't want to scare Papa again."

"You're right, Eli." He put his arm around her and they sat down just inside the entrance to the cave for a while, watching the waves wash up on the rocks beneath them.

§

English! They're speaking English! He couldn't make out enough to understand their conversation above the sound of the wind and screeching of the birds – only enough to catch a word here and there. But it was definitely English.

He had to get a better view. He knew if he followed the path down the Needle's Eye side of the cliff, he could safely work his way around to a spot where he could see several of the caves. He'd be a bit further away, but at least he might be able to see them. He carefully picked his way back up the cliff.

§

Oskar rubbed his ankle. "It still hurts, Eli. Is that what's supposed to happen? How long does it take?"

"It shouldn't hurt at all by now, Oskar." She reached over and squeezed it gently.

"Ouch! Eli? Is it still broken?"

"Nope! But it is a little swollen. Maybe it takes a bit longer; after all we're really not vampires, and Jonathan says we're not as strong as Mama and I were when we..." She looked down at her chest, wiped away a bit of blood and examined her wound. It was healed over, but there was still a fiery red spot where the bone had protruded from her chest. "Look, Oskar. Mine hasn't healed completely either." Eli felt a sudden chill. *What if...*

She stood up and pressed her arms to her sides. "Oskar. I..." she hesitated for a moment, just to make sure. "Oskar, I...I can't do it!! I can't grow my wings!!"

"What!? Let me try." He couldn't do it either, no matter how hard he tried. Finally, they just stood there, looking at each other. "What do we do now, Eli?" he peered over the edge of the cliff.

"I don't know, Oskar. Let me think." She sat down in the grass, pulled her knees up to her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. Oskar examined the cliff face carefully, but he knew it was no use; it was almost vertical, moss-covered, slippery, and there were no hand- or foot-holds that he could see. They were trapped. And the dark clouds coming in from the south didn't look good. A wave of panic swept over him.

"It'll be okay, Oskar. Mama will be back in two days; in fact, once we don't show up, I'm sure she'll come back as soon as tonight. And once she's here, you can tell her where we are. She'll bring us more Ejuice, and we can fly ourselves out. She could even carry us, if she had to. It'll all work out, I promise." She pulled him down beside her and put her arm around him.

§

Marcus stretched out on the ledge and peeked around the corner. And gasped. He grabbed his binoculars and looked again. *Two children, a boy and a girl. Without wings. And...covered from*

head to toe with what looks like blood! The hair on the back of his neck stood up. His mind filled with visions of Satanic rituals, in which beautiful young children were sacrificed on bloody altars. He had read about such things in “News of the World,” but that didn’t explain the wings. *What the hell is going on?!!* Nothing made any sense. He saw them fly. But they had no wings and they were covered with blood. But they were just sitting there quietly as though they hadn’t a care in the world. He pulled out his camera and took a few pictures. Were these even the same children? One was blond and the other did have long black hair as near as he could tell, as matted as it was with blood.

He heard the rumble of thunder and glanced at the dark clouds approaching rapidly from the south. He retreated hastily and worked his way back around the cliff face. This was absolutely not the place to be caught in one of these summer storms. He felt the sudden chill in the air and a few drops of rain as he finally pulled himself up next to the lighthouse and headed for the door. He had no sooner shut it behind him when the full force of the wind drove the rain hard against the windows. He couldn’t even see the helicopter pad. He wondered what the children were doing now. Would they simply sprout wings and fly away? Or were there more of them living in the caves who did have wings? Perhaps bigger ones. He shuddered, then went back and locked the door, rolled the heavy battery dolly up against it, and wedged it under the handle. The thought of being visited by bloody aliens in the middle of the night made him extremely uncomfortable.

He sighed, then stepped into the elevator, determined to go down and finish his job. He decided he’d work all night if necessary to get it all done. He had more interesting things to do tomorrow, assuming they hadn’t left.

§

Eli and Oskar stood in the rain, washing each other off as best they could. They took off their suits and washed them thoroughly in the streams of water pouring out of cracks in the rock wall, then Oskar washed Eli’s hair, until it was as clean as he could get it. Finally, they stepped back into the shelter of the cave. By now, the rain was coming down in sheets, and the temperature had dropped at least 10 degrees. The wind was blowing directly into the mouth of the cave at this point.

“Eli, it’s really getting cold! Maybe we should go further inside the cave until the storm is over.”

Eli realized she was getting cold too. “Boy when that stuff wears off, it really wears off doesn’t it. You know, we probably shouldn’t have gotten our suits wet. They’ll take forever to dry out in this, and we don’t have anything to keep us warm.”

“They wouldn’t have helped much anyway, Eli. They’re just swimsuits.” He rubbed his hands together, and started shivering. “I’m really, really cold!” He stepped further into the cave, and crouched down behind a large boulder. Eli spread their suits out on a narrow ledge out of the rain, and slipped down beside him. They put their arms around each other. “I sure wish we had our pajamas right now, Eli.”

She giggled and snuggled up against him. “Or our blankets; or our snowsuits. Or Papa’s long underwear” She giggled again, but she was shivering hard now.

“Eli, lie down here in the corner against the wall. It’s not as windy here.” Without a word of protest, she took his hand and slid past him into the corner. *She must really be cold, or she would have been mad at me for implying that she needs to be taken care of.* He gently moved up against her and wrapped his arms and legs around her, trying desperately to keep her warm. He was cold too, but he knew he hadn’t lost any blood. And her lips were turning blue. He put his head on her shoulder and directed his breath against her neck, hoping it would warm her up at least a little bit.

They couldn’t sleep at all. If it wasn’t the cold wind, it was the thunder and lightning. And the thought of sleeping in the bone pit out of the wind wasn’t even a consideration for either of them.

§

Richard paced back and forth. It was already dark and they still hadn’t returned. Jack was on the landline, trying to convince Jonathan to bring Elaine back right away.

“Jack, the pilot tells me there’s no way he can land in this storm. And the rough seas make it dangerous to try it by boat also. I think we should wait until the storm lets up.”

“But they’re out there alone! They could be seriously injured, or worse. We need to look for them, and without Elaine, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Let me talk to Elaine, Jack.” Richard reached for the phone. “Elaine? What do you think?”

“Rich? I’m going to fly back on my own. Jonathan doesn’t think it’s safe to be out in this in the plane, or even in the bigger boat. The trip by sea might be doable, but navigating the harbor in the bigger boat with the huge swells, would be exceedingly dangerous.”

“No! Absolutely not! We don’t know what’s happened to the children. It could have something to do with the injection; much more likely when you consider the fact that they are both missing. One could have been injured, but it’s highly unlikely that both of them were. You can’t risk it. Your wings could fail over the ocean and we’d never know what happened to you.”

There was silence on the other end. Rich could almost feel Elaine struggling to accept the truth of what he had said. He knew how hard it would be for her to do nothing; it simply wasn’t in her nature.

“Jack and I will look for them, Elaine. We’ve got the truck, and we’ve got the Land Rover. They both have good radios, and enough of the new wireless relay grid is in place that we’re not likely to lose contact virtually anywhere on the island. And in the future the children will both be required to carry their cell phones with them when they go off alone. *If there is any future for them.* He realized he was terrified, but he couldn’t let on. If he did, she’d try to fly home, and he’d have to worry about all three of them. And if he lost all three of them...

“I’ll go tell Liva and the kids,” Jack said quietly.

§

Marcus woke up to a powerful clap of thunder. He could hear the rain pounding against the window. The red display of his digital alarm clock glowed in the dim light: 8:00AM. *Damn! When is this storm going to let up? I need to get more pictures.* He had given this a lot of thought while he was working. He had decided he wasn’t going to tell anyone about this until the film was developed. If what he had already was good enough, he could probably sell them to the tabloids, or if he was lucky, to “News of the World.” Then he could sell the location and other tidbits to the highest bidder. If he played his cards right, he could make a small fortune. But a few more pictures would certainly help. He removed his wide-angle lens and replaced it with his telescopic lens. He knew it would be harder to navigate the narrow path with it, but he had no choice. He had to get more pictures.

He got dressed and climbed up to the dome. The clouds were a bit lighter, and he could even see an occasional band of blue off in the distance, but the rain seemed just as intense as the night before; just a bit more off and on. The temperature had dropped even further, down to 42 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the old Mercury thermometer outside on the deck. He could see his breath, he realized. And the children had only those flimsy white suits on. Were they cold? Probably not. If they could get cold they wouldn’t dress that way in the first place. Perhaps their planet is further from the sun, he thought to himself. That is, if they really were aliens. He still hadn’t worked that out yet. But if they weren’t aliens, the possibilities were ever darker. There were only limited options if they were indigenous, and angels definitely wasn’t one of them. He headed back down the stairs, put his camera and extra film in his small backpack, and waited for the first lull in the storm; about 20 minutes or so he calculated, based on the rapid approach of the first band of blue sky from the south.

§

Eli was shivering uncontrollably, no matter how tightly he held her. Her lips had been blue for most of the night, and her ears and fingertips were bright red and numb. He had been thinking hard all night, and had come up with an idea – outrageous and unthinkable, but an idea, nonetheless. He just had to figure out how to present it to Eli.

“Eli? Did you ever lose your abilities as a vampire? I mean, your strength or your ability to fly?”

“Only a few times, when I was starving, Oskar. And then I would hibernate. I almost wish I could hibernate now. This is awful! I’m completely useless!” she held her arm out in front of her, trying to keep it still, but it shook so hard she finally gave up and let it drop uselessly into her lap. “I can’t even take care of you anymore. I feel so stupid and helpless!!” She could feel herself getting dizzier and more disoriented, the colder she got.

“I have an idea, Eli. But you have to let me finish before you say anything. Okay?”

She nodded. She had never seen Oskar acting so serious before.

“If you had Ejuice, how long would it take you to be strong again?”

She gathered her thoughts carefully. It was almost as though she could only see parts of what she was thinking; disjointed parts that briefly made sense, then dissolved into meaningless sounds, *sort of like when falling asleep while the TV is on*, she thought to herself. “Jonathan said that once the initial 12 hour adjustment period was over, it would only take a few minutes to get lost strength back; kind of like how long it takes for sugar to get into the system of a diabetic.” She tried to remember more of the details, but just couldn’t. “Why, Oskar?”

“And what is the primary ingredient of Ejuice? You know, the one that actually makes it work?”

“Blood, of course. But you know that, Oskar; why...” Her eyes got big as she realized where this was going. “No! Absolutely not! I couldn’t! I won’t. We’ll wait. Mama will come soon.”

“You didn’t let me finish, Eli. I’m stronger than you. I didn’t lose any blood. If I were to give you some of my blood, you could fly us both out of here, even in this weather. You’re too weak and cold, Eli. I’m afraid you’re going to freeze to death if we have to stay here much longer in this cold. You should see yourself!” Her hollow eyes stared back at him, as she tried to fully understand what he was saying.

Slowly, she began to piece together the logic behind Oskar’s offer. It might even work, she conceded to herself. But she simply...couldn’t stand the thought. It was out of the question. “No, Oskar. I won’t do it. I...I don’t even think I could if I wanted to. Blood tastes awful to me now. I’d never be able to drink it without throwing it back up.” She paused, “And it would be your blood, Oskar. Yours! I couldn’t.” she looked away from him, as the vivid memories of that night in the cellar flooded back. When she almost killed him over a few drops of his blood.

“Eli, if you won’t do it to save us, would you at least do it to save me?”

“What do you mean, Oskar?” she leaned back against the rock to keep her head from spinning.

He slowly stood up in front of her and turned toward the cave entrance. “If you were to die here, I’d die too.” He said softly.

“No you wouldn’t, Oskar. Besides, I’m not going to die.” Secretly, she wasn’t so sure. Another night like this one, and she wasn’t so sure. She felt weaker than she ever had before.

“I’d die here too, because I’d walk right out of the cave, across the grass and...” he started for the cave entrance.

Eli reached up and grabbed him by the leg. He effortlessly pulled himself free. “Oskar! Stop it!”

“Eli, I swear to you. If you die in this cave because you’re too stubborn to let me help you, I’ll do it. So help me God, I’ll do it.” She could see the tears in his eyes. His total sense of despair and hopelessness enveloped them both. *I’ll do it, Eli. You know I will.*

And she did know it. She burst into tears. “Oskar you can’t! Please promise me! Please!”

He smiled at her grimly and held his arm out to her, wrist up. “Do it! Now!” As if on cue, sunlight suddenly flooded the cave entrance, accompanied by distant rolling thunder.

§

Marcus felt his way carefully along the cliff. The path was narrow, though not considered particularly dangerous, but it was wet now; and slippery. He might not die if he slipped off, but he knew it would be unpleasant. It was only for the last 10 meters or so that he would be high enough off the rocks to fall to his death. But the path was also wider through that area; safe, at least as long as the wind stayed calm. He could see the sunlight reflecting off the turbulent water just offshore. The sun would reach the cliff wall and the caves just about the time he settled in at the end of the path. *Perfect! I should get some good shots from there. If they’re still there.* He knew the odds were against him, but the thought of all that money gave him unusual clarity and focus. It was certainly worth a little risk. He carefully opened his backpack, took out his camera and small tripod, and quietly positioned himself at the base of the final rock outcropping such that he had a direct line of site to the cave entrance. Even if they looked directly at him, he would be hard to spot. He carefully focused the camera, and waited.

§

Eli allowed Oskar to help her to her feet and together, they walked slowly out of the cave into the sun. They stood there in the sunlight, arms around each other, feeling the warmth of the sun on their bodies. Another roll of thunder was a stark reminder that this was only temporary. The air was still freezing cold, and once the sun dipped back behind the clouds, they knew they would be cold once again.

My God! They’re beautiful! Marcus took several shots as the two children slowly turned around in each other’s arms, revealing one angelic face surrounded by raven-black hair, then the other, blond haired and blue-eyed, budding handsome in a Nordic sort of way. *How could I have ever thought...They’re just children!* He felt a sudden urge to cry out to them; to tell them he would send for help; that everything would be okay. But he hesitated. All that money...

They sat down on the damp grass together. Eli pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. She laid her cheek on her knees and stared into Oskar’s eyes. He leaned over and gently kissed her on the lips, then slowly raised his arm. Eli gently placed it across her knees, and without taking her eyes off his, grew a tiny pair of razor-sharp pearl-white fangs, petite, slender, and almost invisible from where Marcus was lying. Which is why it took him a bit longer to react to what he was seeing than would normally have been the case.

“Do it, Eli,” Oskar said firmly. He gently pressed his arm up against her fangs, felt the twin needle pricks and watched intently as Eli’s eyes rolled back in her head, and she bit down firmly on his wrist. He felt her hand tighten its grip, felt her tremble, and watched, detached, as a thin rivulet of his blood ran along the underside of his arm, down her leg, and disappeared into the damp grass.

And she drank.

Marcus gasped. *What the hell!!* He saw the blood running down her leg. He zoomed in, following its path back up her leg, across the boy’s arm and...

Her mouth was covered with blood. Her eyes, golden, almost reptilian, rhythmically rolled back in her head each time she swallowed. *She’s drinking his blood. And he’s letting her do it!* He felt a hard knot in the pit of his stomach. *And I almost called out to them! I almost...*

“Eli? Is that enough? It’s starting to hurt a bit.” Oskar was concerned but definitely not worried. She’d stop when she felt she had enough. He was sure of it.

She raised her head a moment, fangs dripping blood, and looked at him. Or looked through him, rather. Oskar watched as the deadly balancing act played out until finally, he felt the scale tip in his favor. Her golden eyes became liquid, then fluidly swirled into a deep royal blue. She shook it off, then gently but firmly wrapped her other hand around his wrist, and squeezed. Hard. “Let me hold this a while, Oskar. Until it stops bleeding. Are you okay? Do you feel okay?”

“I’m fine Eli. And take it easy! You’re already strong again!”

He could feel the warmth radiating from her body. He could see her strength returning, evident in her fluid movements as she gracefully stood up, effortlessly pulled him to his feet and hugged him tightly, still grasping his wrist in her hand. Without a word, she led him back into the cave. She handed him his suit, tore her own into strips, tied them together carefully and fashioned a crude harness for him. She knew he would be in danger because of his weakened condition, and she didn’t want to take any chances. “We should hurry, Oskar. I don’t know how long we have. He quickly put his suit on, slipped into the harness and followed her back outside into the sun.

Marcus took as many pictures as he could, as they stepped out on the grass lip once again. The boy had his suit on, but the girl was still completely naked; and, he realized, incredibly beautiful in spite of everything he had just seen her do. He thought about the legends of the Sirens, whose great beauty and beautiful singing lured ancient sailors to their deaths. He was absolutely certain now that he was looking at the source of those legends; beautiful, yet dark and deadly. He watched in awe as she lowered her arms to her sides, then raised them suddenly over her head, unfurling her jet-black wings. The boy moved in behind her, tied what appeared to be a thin rope around her waist, put his arms around her neck and waited patiently. Finally, she straightened her shoulders, stood there ramrod straight for a moment, poised on the edge of the cliff; then leaned forward and fell toward the rocks below.

Marcus gasped, almost lost his balance, then gasped again as she pulled up short of the rocks, and with several powerful strokes of her wings, swung around the side of the cliff and headed inland, with the boy, legs locked around her waist, clinging tightly to her back.

He sat there, stunned, trying to make some sort of sense of it all when, with a sudden gust of wind, the rain returned with a vengeance. He scrambled to his feet, stuffed his gear in his backpack, and hastily worked his way back around the cliff. By the time he pulled himself up beside the lighthouse, he could barely see his hand in front of his face. He stumbled back inside, slammed the door behind him and sat down hard on the floor, completely out of breath. All he could think about was all the money he was about to make.

Chapter 19: The Photographer

In the rapidly-returning darkness, Eli flew low toward the rising hills to the north, trying to keep as close as possible to the ground, where she thought the warmer air would be. She could feel Oskar shivering, even as his grip around her neck tightened. *Oskar? Do you think you can hang on for a few more minutes?*

I'll try, Eli. But it's so cold, my fingers are getting numb. And the wind is awful!

Eli was frightened. She knew she could either stop now, land on the road below and hope Papa or Jack would find them before Oskar froze to death himself; or she could keep going, hoping he could hang on. But if she dropped him, she didn't know if the harness would hold or not. And she didn't know if she had the speed and strength to catch him if he fell. She was fairly low, but moving fast, aided by the powerful tailwind. The fall would almost certainly kill him if she didn't catch him. *Oskar, if you can hang on just a bit longer, I'll fly over the hill and see if I can spot a place we can stay on the other side out of the wind until they find us.*

I'll be fine, Eli. Do whatever you think is best.

She climbed rapidly as the rocky hilltop became visible through the driving rain. They skimmed the boulder-strewn ridge less than a meter above the ground.

She had no sooner dipped down the other side of the hill into the small valley, when she spotted the bouncing headlights of the Land Rover on the narrow gravel road beneath her. *Look Oskar! It's Papa or Jack! I'll bet they're looking for us!* She circled down quickly, and landed on the road in front of them. Jack slammed on the brakes, flung open the door and rushed up to them.

"Thank God! We thought you were..."

"We're not, Jack! But Oskar saved our lives. Otherwise..." She quickly retracted her wings, untied the makeshift harness, and helped Oskar to the ground.

Hannah rushed up, nearly knocking her over, "Eli! We thought you were..." There were tears in her eyes as she grabbed her and hugged her tightly. Then, she dropped to the ground and kissed Oskar. "You're really cold!" she grabbed his arm. "Come on! We've brought warm blankets and Ejuice."

Jack quickly gathered him up in his arms, carried him to the car and slipped him into the back seat next to Hannah, who immediately covered him with a heavy wool blanket. "Oh Oskar! We were so worried about you! What happened? Why were you gone so long?!" Eli slipped in on the other side, pulled the blanket around them all and pushed herself up against them, until Oskar was tightly sandwiched between them. They both rubbed his back and arms vigorously until his fingers tingled, then began to burn, as the feeling returned. Oskar leaned back and closed his eyes. He couldn't believe how exhausted he was.

"Drink this, Oskar!" Hannah handed him a cold bottle of Ejuice.

“I...I’m okay, Hannah. I’ll just wait until we get home.”

Eli gave him a sympathetic look, then kissed him on the cheek. “It’s okay, Oskar. I understand,” she whispered to him. She took the bottle from Hannah and drank it herself. “Oskar’s feeling a little sick right now, Hannah. Maybe when we get home, he’ll feel up to it.”

Jack swung the Rover around and headed back down the hill. He grabbed the mike off the dashboard as soon as he hit the beginning of the pavement. “Dr. Dawson?! We’ve got them! Eli apparently flew Oskar out on her back...no, we just started back; I haven’t had any time to find out...yes, they’re both fine!” He could hear Jason yelling in the background.

By the time they pulled up in front of the house, they had told Jack and Hannah the whole story – or almost the whole story. Eli had saved one small part for Mama; a part she knew only Mama could possibly understand. Oskar’s blood. And why it had tasted...so good. And why it had frightened her so much.

Hannah and Eli hadn’t even gotten Oskar up the steps before the truck pulled in behind them, and Papa and Jason rushed over. “Eli, what happened? Is Oskar okay?” Jason grabbed him around the waist and virtually carried him up the steps into the house single-handedly.

“Eli? Where’s your suit? What on earth happened out there? I was sure you were...”

Eli’s carefully propped-up composure dissolved away. “It got torn, Papa, when we fell into a hole and got hurt bad. Then I used it to make a harness for Oskar, because he was so weak, because I...had to drink his blood so I could fly him out, and it was all his idea, and he saved my life because I was freezing to death, then I thought I would lose him when we were flying back, because he was so cold I thought he would fall, until we saw Jack and Hannah on the road...”

Papa scooped her up in his arms, and carried her, sobbing, into the house.

§

“Eli, Jack and I have something to tell you.” Papa sat down at the table. Jack sat down next to Eli. “Your mama will be home tonight. The storm will be over by then, according to the latest weather report, and the plane is on standby, ready to take off as soon as the pilot gets the go-ahead. But Jack and I couldn’t wait. And we didn’t.” he winked at Oskar, who was now staring at him, mouth open.

“What do you mean, Papa?”

“Oskar knows, don’t you Oskar?” Jack grinned at him.

Oskar nodded, but said nothing. He pretended to concentrate on his glass of Ejuice.

“What Papa?!” Eli couldn’t take any more of this.

“Jack and I injected ourselves as soon as we were certain that Elaine wouldn’t make it back. We hoped that, if we hadn’t found you within 12 hours, at least one of us would be able to talk to Oskar at that point. But Oskar’s resourcefulness beat us by a couple of hours. And by then, if I have read him correctly, it might have been too late.”

“You mean you’ve...”

Jack kissed her on the forehead. “Yep! A bit ahead of schedule, but we’ve both done it.”

“But Papa, you didn’t want to do it! You shouldn’t have...”

“Eli, I was wrong; dead wrong. How could a father not want to have every advantage in being able to protect his children from harm? I was selfish. You were able to go places I couldn’t go. How could I expect to look after you if I couldn’t go there myself? No, you just made the decision easy for me.” He paused, then in a soft voice, continued; “It seems that, since I first met you that magical winter evening in Karlstad, you’ve made a lot of very important, life-altering decisions so much easier for me to make. If it weren’t for you, I would be leading an incredibly boring life, writing books and becoming a stodgy, ivy-covered professor, instead of being here, surrounded by you and your...entourage, not knowing from one day to the next what havoc you will unwittingly wreak.”

“Entourage?! I’m not part of any entourage,” Oskar complained.

“I meant that in the best possible way, Oskar. Would ‘support team’ suit you better? Or ‘comrades-in-arms?’ And remember, you’re in good company. Everyone on this island is here, directly or indirectly, because of Eli.”

“Except for the people that look after the lighthouse, Papa.” Eli reminded him.

“True enough, Eli. But it wouldn’t be as modern a lighthouse as it is without Archaeogenetics’ contributions to its renovations and maintenance. So even they have benefited from your existence.”

As much as Eli appreciated what Papa was trying to do, these attempts by him had recently begun to make her uncomfortable. She was just herself, for better or for worse. The island and all their good fortune came from a man she hadn’t even known existed until very recently, and whose wealth, or at least the seeds of it, came from a very dark place. As did she herself; a fact that was always in the back of her mind no matter how hard Papa tried to expunge it. Of all the people in her little ‘entourage’ only Lord Törnkvist had killed more innocent people than she had.

But you’re the only one that feels the guilt for it, Eli.

Tell that to all their widows and orphans, Oskar. I’m sure that will make them all feel much better.

The older she got, the surer she was that this burden would be hers forever – as it should be, she finally realized. And she knew for certain that she would be much less of a person if it ever went away.

Papa looked at her intently, then glanced at Jack. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. Oskar had shared the exchange with him also. Papa was suddenly very sad; sad that those innocent days of her childhood were rapidly fading away and being replaced by the cold, hard reality of her approaching adulthood. He desperately wanted to take her up in his arms and hold her close – to try to forestall, even for a short time, the inevitable. He couldn't shake the feeling that, if it weren't for the presence of children in the world and their still uncontaminated, crystal clear, sparkling love for life, his own life would be the lesser for it. Eli was contagious; and she had infected him completely with a wonderful, incurable disease. He fought the sudden urge to drag her to the lab and inject her with the anti-aging vaccine before she got even another minute older.

§

Mama? Is it really you? Eli lay in bed next to Oskar, listening to the sound of the jet engines winding down on the tarmac.

I'm here, Butterfly. You stay right where you are! I'll be up in a jiffy.

"Oskar? I need to talk to Mama for a bit – alone. Is that okay?"

"Sure, Eli. I understand. I'm pretty tired anyway. I'll come over after a while." He was asleep in less than a minute.

Eli carefully got out of bed, making sure she didn't wake him, tiptoed over to her own room, and climbed into her bed. And waited.

§

Mama walked in quietly and sat on the edge of her bed. "I had Papa and Jack tell me everything, so you wouldn't have to," she whispered. "Where's Oskar?"

"Asleep in his room, Mama. I had to talk to you about...the things I didn't tell Papa and Jack."

Elaine lay down next to her and rubbed her back, "Tell me, Butterfly."

And out it all came. Oskar's offer of his own blood to save them and her revulsion at the very idea. Then Oskar's threat, and her final capitulation. Then, her unmitigated lust and the return of the darkness she thought she had rid herself of forever. "Mama, it tasted so good! I almost couldn't stop. If Oskar hadn't said something, I might have..." she buried her face in her hands, then sobbed on Elaine's shoulder.

“There, there, little one. It’s not at all what you think. Don’t you remember Papa’s story about the two parasites? He determined early on that blood was the primary dietary need of the second parasite, the one dependent on the bat chromosomes to become active; that part that now partially resides in all of us now, less the primeval brain. Don’t you realize that the parasite would have died out very early on if it didn’t like the taste of its primary dietary need? It’s part of the same package. And your 250-year-old brain, with its dark years of experience, simply made the wrong association and the wrong assumption as to its significance. Believe me, you wouldn’t have eaten Oskar.”

“Are you sure, Mama? It tasted so good.”

“Kind of like a chocolate sundae when you’re absolutely starved for ice cream, right?” she grinned at her. “It all came together for me when Jonathan spilled the beans the other night. I myself had wondered why the Ejuice tasted so good to me. I had just chalked it up to Jonathan’s ability as a chef. I should have known better huh? Jonathan? A good cook?”

Eli giggled. “Remember his charcoal burgers that time he cooked at our pool party?”

“How could I ever forget? And the look on Papa’s face when he bit into his.” They both started laughing.

Oskar stepped into the room, rubbing his eyes. “Hi, Mom! I missed you.” He sat down on the end of the bed. “Eli saved our lives again, Mom. She’s getting really good at it,” he said softly.

Elaine sat up and put her arm around him, “It’s no good Oskar. Eli already told me the whole story. That was really brave of you...and smart, I might add. It might never have occurred to me.”

“She would have died, Mom. And it would have been my fault.”

“By what stretch did you come to that conclusion, Oskar?” Elaine was exasperated. Oskar was a master at conjuring up responsibility where none existed and she was determined to make it as difficult for him as possible.

“If it weren’t for me, Eli would still be a vampire. She wouldn’t have been weak and she could have flown out easily, and the cold wouldn’t have affected her at all.”

Eli, incredulous, looked at Mama for a second, then they both burst out laughing.

“Oskar, are you sure you’re not responsible for Gudmund’s death also? After all, if you hadn’t stolen Eli’s heart, Gudmund might still be alive, having not yet secured Eli’s safety and happiness,” Elaine mocked.

“That’s just silly, Mom. I didn’t...” Oskar grinned sheepishly. “Okay, okay. I get the point. But still...”

Eli pounced on him before he could say another word, “I’m going to eat you Oskar! Before you can kill me. And any jury would find that I did it in self-defense.” She grabbed him in a tight bear hug and playfully bit him on the neck. Elaine’s eyes met hers for a split second, and they smiled knowingly at one another. Elaine stepped quickly away from the bed before she was dragged into the fray, relieved that Eli had finally come to terms with her past just a small bit more. *I’ll take what I can get*, she thought to herself, knowing full well that the battle was far from over.

She backed quietly out of the room as the two of them wrestled ferociously on the bed together. It was amusing to her to see them both trying so hard to control their new strength, at the same time each of them was still trying to gain the upper hand. She knew neither of them wanted to destroy the room in the process. She closed the door quietly behind her and headed down the hall.

“Give up Oskar! You know you’re no match for me!”

“You forget who beat you in the race, Eli. I’m bigger than you, and stronger now!”

“Yeah, but I’m smarter! You said so yourself. Besides, I hate losing.” She gritted her teeth as she got a new grip around his waist and rolled over on top of him. Oskar used her inertia against her and kept the roll going until he was once again on top and her head was hanging off the end of the bed, neck fully exposed. Her eyes got big as she realized the precarious position she was in. “Oskar! You’re hurting me!” she bluffed.

“Sorry Eli, but I’m busy right now. I’ll apologize later!” he began tickling her exposed neck with a new-found ferocity. After flailing around helplessly for a few seconds, she folded like a wet paper bag.

“Uncle! Uncle! You win Oskar!” She wasn’t willing to destroy her new bed just to win, and Oskar knew it – and kept at it just a bit longer. It wasn’t often he got a chance like this.

“Truce?”

“Nope! You won, fair and square, Oskar.” she sat up and put her arms around him. “You’re so cute when you win! You always have such a surprised look on your face.” She kissed him gently, pulled him down on the bed and fluffed her pillow for him. He pulled the blanket up over them.

“Don’t forget Eli. You still have to make my bed. But I’ll let it go until tomorrow morning just this once,” he whispered.

She bit him on the neck again, softly this time, then snuggled up against him, proud of herself for not having decked him after that last remark. *This losing isn’t as bad as I thought it would be, Oskar. I think I could get used to it.*

No. You couldn’t.

§

Marcus stood at the door and watched the helicopter drop slowly onto the pad, bounce a couple of times, then come to a stop. He waited until the rotors had completely stopped and the four crew members had already begun loading the old batteries and damaged cables before he made himself visible. *I brought them up. Let them load them*, he thought to himself. Finally, he stepped outside, locking the door behind him, and carried his backpack and suitcase out to the pad. He tossed them in the back with the batteries and climbed in.

“How’d it go, Marcus? Get any more good bird shots,” Simon kidded. Marcus was known for his interest in the local birdlife, and often got good-natured jabs for his huge collection of bird books.

“A few; just a few. Nothing to write home about though. The storm slowed me down a bit.”

“Yeah, that was a good one all right. Another few hours and you might have been stuck here another night.

“Well, I wouldn’t have minded at all. It’s a beautiful island.” He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, as with a roar, the now fully-loaded helicopter lifted off the pad.

He had spent the last day deep in thought, trying to piece together everything he had seen. He had decided that the two of them were almost certainly children, young teen-agers he would guess, if they aged like humans. And something unexpected had happened in or near the cave. Something dark and perverted; he had no doubt. Perhaps they had fought and injured one another. And they were both unabashedly naked when it was over. Sexual activity was most probably another factor; a thought that titillated him even as it disgusted him. Perhaps finally, the boy had to submit to the girl’s will by allowing her to drink his blood. And by some twisted logic, she had to carry him home because he was too weak to fly for himself. One thing was certain; he couldn’t judge their actions on any scale of normal human behavior. Humans don’t drink one another’s blood. But one thing intrigued him more than any other: Despite the ferocity of the storm, they had left the shelter of the cave and, with one carrying the other for whatever reason, flew north toward the center of the island; not toward the cliffs.

Why? Why would they do that unless they had someplace safer to go? Were they flying home? Were they flying to the safety of others? To their families somewhere on the island? If so, he had found a goldmine. He was scheduled for another maintenance run a month from now. If his pictures sold, he could offer to get more and threaten to sell them to the highest bidder. But he had to be careful, he realized. If Simon or any of the others recognized the photo locations, he could lose all his leverage with the tabloids. No, he would have to crop the photos carefully and use only those with generic backgrounds, like the cave photos, which, of course, were potentially the best of them all. He could hardly wait until he got home to his darkroom.

§

The instant the bell rang, Eli jumped out of the pool and raced for the front door. “I’ll get it, Hannah!”

“Wait for me, Eli,” Hannah called out frantically, still scrambling out of the pool. She knew Eli was teasing her, but there wasn’t much she could do about it. As long as her mom refused her the injection, Eli would always be faster than she was. It normally didn’t bother her, but she knew Jack and Henry were coming over and, since she hadn’t seen Jack for a couple of weeks now, she had wanted to let them in herself – and had made the mistake of telling Eli.

When she finally got to the door, Eli was waiting for her, a big grin on her face. She bowed and stepped out of the way. “After you, Hannah.”

Hannah took a deep breath, then calmly opened the door – and was promptly grabbed by Jack, who spun her around several times and set her back on her feet so fast she almost lost her balance. “Hi, beautiful!! Where’s Hannah? And what are you doing in her swim suit?” He winked at Eli, who by this time had retreated to the living room.

“It’s me, Jack! I’m Hannah!” she blushed as she realized she had fallen for his joke.

“No! It can’t be! I could have sworn you were Eli. You’re much too pretty to be Hannah!”

She punched him on the arm. “It’s me and you knew it! Between you and Eli, I don’t stand a chance around here!” she pretended to be angry.

“Hi, girls! Where are your mom and dad, Eli?” Henry strode in past them, a sheaf of newspapers under his arm.

“Out on the patio, Henry. Are you and Jack coming in for a swim?”

“A bit later, Eli. We need to have a quick talk with your folks first.” Hannah quickly took Jack’s hand and led them both out to the Patio.

Eli started up the stairs and almost ran into Oskar and Jason on their way down. “It’s about time! Haven’t you two gotten tired of that silly game yet?”

“Silly game?! She must be nuts, Oskar. You never told me she was nuts,” Jason pretended to be shocked.

Eli grabbed him by the shoulders and shook her head fiercely back and forth like a wet dog, totally soaking him; then turned and sprinted through the dining room and dodged out the back door, with Jason close on her heels. She leaped into the pool, arms tucked around her knees, and disappeared behind a wave of water, which finished the job she had started on the stairs. Jason was dripping wet from head to toe. “Darn you, Eli! I’ve got a ZIP disk in my pocket! If you ruined it, I’ll..”

Eli laughed, “You’ll what, Jason? You have to catch me first, and you can’t do that. And even if you could, what would you do with me?”

He glared at her, pulled the disk out of his pocket, and examined it carefully. “I’ve got a good imagination; I’m sure I could think of something.” He laid it carefully on the picnic table. “You’re lucky this time. It seems to be dry.”

“What a relief! I was shaking in my boots!” Eli taunted. “Why don’t you come on in and teach me a lesson?”

“Eli? Oskar? Would you both come here a second? We need to talk.” Papa sounded serious.

Eli climbed out of the pool, eying Jason cautiously, then stepped over to the table with Oskar, where Henry had spread out today’s **News of the World**. On the front page of the local section was a half-page-sized photograph of the two of them standing on the lip of the cave. Eli’s wings were unfurled and Oskar’s arms were around her waist. In the lower right-hand corner of the photograph was another smaller one overlaying it. It was tightly cropped, but Eli knew immediately where it had been taken: She and Oskar, after having just passed through the eye, one above the other, wings outstretched. And, to make matters worse, black censor bars had been placed over her privates in the large picture. Fortunately in that shot, her face was turned away from the camera. The photo was also a bit blurry, almost intentionally so, as if the photographer were trying to tantalize the viewer.

“How embarrassing!” Eli turned bright red. Jason was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Get away, Jason!” Hannah scolded. “It’s not funny!”

“Neither of you saw anything? No indication that the lighthouse was inhabited?”

“No, Papa! The helicopter was gone! It had left early that morning. I heard it go! And the schedule said the same.” She looked at Oskar, who nodded in agreement.

“I didn’t see anyone either, Dad.”

“Well, the article’s take on this is just slightly tongue-in-cheek. Just enough so they can back off easily if it’s proven to be a fraud, but it’s serious enough so they can claim they published it first, if it turns out to be real. Just look at the article’s title: ‘Amateur Photographer on Vacation takes Photos of Feral Batgirl and Batboy.’ And if this guy is smart, these are not his best pictures. Notice your faces aren’t clear in either of them. He’s deliberately held back; probably waiting for the best offer. We absolutely have to find out who he is before...”

“Before someone figures out where these pictures were taken,” Elaine finished for him.

“Does Jonathan know, Jack?”

“I called him this morning, Dr. Dawson. He’s probably talking to his Maritime Maintenance Inc. contact as we speak. He was very angry; almost incoherent, when I got off the phone with him.”

“I hope he’s not mad at us. We didn’t know...”

“No Eli, he definitely was not. He kept yelling something about government incompetence and ancient mariners at the helm, steering the ship onto the rocks.” Jack grinned at her.

“Well, until this get straightened out. Please stay away from the lighthouse. Their schedules are clearly not to be trusted. I know you wanted to explore the cave a bit more, but It’ll have to wait until we’re sure we get more timely information on the maintenance situation.” Papa stood up and headed for the grill. “Dinner will be ready in 30 minutes, so get in as much swimming as you can.”

Jason slipped up and put his hand on Eli’s shoulder, “I’m sorry I laughed Eli. You know I didn’t mean anything by it, right?”

She smiled at him, “I know, Jason. And if I hurt your disk, I’m really sorry. If I had known...”

“No big deal, Eli. It’s just a disk, and it seems okay. What do you think they’re going to do?”

“They’ll probably try to talk to him as soon as they find out who he is, or if he actually works for the government at all. I can’t believe I didn’t see him! What’s wrong with me anyway?”

“You had other things on your mind, Eli. You were dying,” he said softly. “And we didn’t know where you were. I wanted to find you so bad. I wanted to pay you back for...” he looked down at his feet.

“Oh, Jason! Hannah was so right about you! You’re the best big brother in the world.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I can hardly wait until you can fly with us.”

“Me too, Eli; me too.” He didn’t think she had any idea how much he wanted it, blood or no blood.

§

Marcus woke up with a start. He had no idea how long the phone had been ringing. He fumbled for it in the dark, knocked it to the floor, groped for it blindly, and finally snatched it up.

“Hello?”

“Is this Marcus Toulson?”

“Who is this?”

“Someone who wants to talk to you about your recently-acquired photographs.”

He was wide awake now. The voice didn't sound familiar at all, and he had only given the number to one person at **News of the World**. "How did you get my name and number?"

"That's not important right now. The important thing is, I know who you are, where you live, and where you took the photographs. We need to talk as soon as possible."

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. *Bloody Hell! How could he know where I took the pictures, unless...* "You're bluffing! You have no idea where..."

"Phoenix Island. Near the lighthouse. You've worked for Maritime Maintenance Inc. for a bit over two years, now, and depending on how you handle this current situation, could still be working there for many years to come."

"Is that a threat of some kind? If so, I don't scare that easily." He hopped out of bed and checked to make sure both doors were locked. He turned on the back and front floodlights, just to be on the safe side, and grabbed an iron pipe from the garage. "I can make enough money with these photos to retire, if I play my cards right. In fact, I'm willing to talk to anyone willing to place a bid on them." He knew his chances of getting any more pictures were slim to none now. But he had saved the best for last. The ones with the blood and wings would be by far the most valuable.

"Then we understand each other perfectly. But any offer I make would have to include all copies and negatives. "

"Of course! They're not worth much if they're not exclusive. You have my word. When would you like to talk? I'll pick the place, of course."

"I'll call you tomorrow with a date and time. I expect you to have picked a place by then. And remember; all the copies and negatives or there's no deal."

"Slow down a minute! How much are we talking about here? I've already been offered £25,000 for the lot, and I haven't even begun to fish."

"How does a million and a half sound to you?"

He sat down hard on his bed. "They're worth that much to you? What are you into on that island, anyway? And more importantly, what are your children into? Among other things, I suspect they may be more into each other than you think." He hadn't realized how completely disgusting it all was to him until now, and whoever this guy was, he had to be culpable in some way. The very idea of children that young doing these things...especially the blood ritual. What was that about?

There was silence on the line for a moment. Then, "I told you what I was willing to pay. Take it or leave it. Unless you think you could do better elsewhere." The voice was cold, emotionless.

“I’ll take it! And I’m sure you’ll love the photographs. They’re very high quality; I know because I developed and printed them myself.” Who does this guy think he is anyway? I don’t have to take his pompous, self-righteous shit! Not even for a million five.

He knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn’t resist. If there was one thing he couldn’t abide, it was arrogant, self-righteous perverts. “The children are beautiful, by the way. Especially the girl. I have an especially good one of her, full frontal in all her budding teen-aged glory wearing only her wings, and I’ve already blown it up to poster size, without losing a bit of clarity. You can see every hair on her ... head. Except for the blood, she might be mistaken for an Angel. But we know better, don’t we?”

The voice on the phone became soft and menacing, “You’re nothing but an ignorant, foul-minded opportunist, who thinks he’s discovered the pot of gold at the end of the **emerging** rainbow. But you need to be more mindful of the lightning, lest you never **get a chance to** hear the thunder.”

Marcus sat there listening to the dial tone for over a minute before he finally hung up. He felt a strong sense of foreboding. That, he was certain, had not been merely a veiled threat. He knew he’d gone too far, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He also knew he’d never get back to sleep at this point. He paced around the room for a few minutes understanding at last the danger he might be in. Finally, he went into his darkroom, gathered up a complete set of prints and returned to the bedroom, where he carefully pulled up a loose floorboard in the closet and slipped them into the large strongbox he had stashed in the crawlspace under the house.

Chapter 20: The Visitor

“Good morning, Doctor Dawson. What can I do for you?” Jonathan leaned back in his chair, happy for the distraction. He was getting tired of dealing with all the problems with Genterapi and their reluctance to reprioritize their synthetic blood research schedule at the “drop of a hat,” as the Project Manager put it. He was also a bit irritated with his dad for having allowed the two companies to grow apart the way he had. It made things much more difficult when speed was of the essence. There were too many egos involved now.

“Have you talked with Maritime Maintenance yet? And if so, what have you found out?”

“His name is Marcus Toulson. On the previous maintenance run, they had discovered rats in the battery room and he volunteered to stay over and do the repair work at the same time a bank of expired batteries was scheduled to be replaced on this latest trip. Normally, battery replacement can be done in a few hours, but the cable replacement and other repair work takes longer. The flight schedule was the same, which is why they hadn’t bothered to update it. To them, air safety was the issue. They didn’t think it was relevant to air safety that a technician was staying over. At any rate, they assured us they would let us know in the future if such a situation arises again.”

“So. What do we do now?”

“We’ll contact him and find out what he wants. Money, I suspect.”

“Do you think we could convince him to just forget what he saw? Do you know enough about him to risk taking him on board? Perhaps give him a job here?”

“No. A quick background check indicates he’s...not the type I would consider to be safe. He seems to be a bit of a blowhard; nice enough on the surface, but easy to lose his temper if he feels he’s been crossed. I think we’ll have to make a deal with him, no matter how distasteful that may be. **He also has connections to a fringe religious fundamentalist group with extreme views on the wages of sin.** I suspect that, as a result, the black wings and blood might have given him pause.”

“That’s unfortunate. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Absolutely not! He knows too much already. I know some people at Genterapi who can help us with this.”

“Okay, but keep me informed. This could quickly get out of hand if he’s not happy with us or our offer.”

§

“But Mom! You said I could. When we were on the island, remember?”

“That was on the island, Hannah, where no one could see you. Over London is an entirely different matter. It’s too dangerous. Someone might see you.”

“No they won’t, Mrs. Sandstrøm. Just ask Mama. We used to do it all the time, and no one ever saw us.”

“She’s right, Livia. If you pick the right night, like tonight, with a new moon, there’s virtually no chance they could be seen. And remember, Oskar will know where they are at all times, and can let me know if there are any problems.”

“Okay, Elaine; but at the first sign of a problem, you’ll bring them back?”

“Of course, Livia. You have my promise.”

“Thanks, Mom!” Hannah gave her a big hug. She could hardly wait for tonight. “Come on, Eli. Let’s pick out what I’m going to wear!”

“Okay Hannah. And you can wear any color you want – as long as it’s black. I have a black skin-suit that Jonathan and Jack got for me, but you need to wear something warm.” They scurried up the stairs together.

“I’m still a bit worried, Elaine. Are you sure this is safe?”

“Jack made her a simple, sturdy harness with a quick-release clip; very strong and light. There’s absolutely no way Hannah could slip off Eli’s back. She’s completely safe.” She paused a moment, “Of course she’d be safer yet if she could fly herself.” She winked at Livia.

“I know, I know. And I’ve decided she can do it as soon as the synthetic blood is perfected. But until then...”

“It’s a reasonable concern, Livia. You have no reason whatsoever to feel defensive about it. If I didn’t have my dark background, I’d feel exactly the same way.”

“Thanks, Elaine. It is comforting to have someone on my side. Nils and Jason are firmly in the other camp. And I’m not sure how Richard feels.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure either. He’s good at that, isn’t he?”

§

“Let me have a taste, Eli. I’ll have to get used to it eventually.” Hannah picked up Eli’s glass and sniffed it carefully. “It smells like strawberry milk.”

“Okay, but just a little. Jonathan says it could give a normal person an upset stomach if they drank too much.”

Hannah took a small sip, made a funny face, and quickly put it down. “I don’t know, Eli. It tastes okay, but the thought of what’s in it creeps me out.”

“Yeah, I can imagine! I’m kind of immune, myself.” She grinned at her.

“I’m sorry, Eli! I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I know, Hannah. From you, of all people, I know.” She pulled her black stocking cap over her head, tucked her hair in around it and looked at herself in the mirror. “Gee, I look like a cat-burglar in a wet suit. But you look like the real thing, especially with your black trainers.

“Why, thank you, Eli. Color coordination is just SO important to me,” she kidded. She stepped into the harness, adjusted the straps, and held up the clip. “I’m ready when you are.”

Eli opened the window, climbed out on the roof and stood back against the sill. Hannah carefully stepped from the window seat onto the sill, clipped herself to the steel loop on Eli’s harness, then wrapped her arms around Eli’s neck. “I’m ready to go, my fairy, my kindred spirit.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I’m not a fairy?” Eli grinned at her.

“Well, you’re not a vampire, and you’re certainly not an angel. Therefore you have to be a fairy!” she gasped as Eli fell forward off the roof, glided low over the pool, then with several powerful thrust of her wings, banked hard left just before the trees and headed back over the roof towards downtown London.

“Where are you taking me, Eli?”

“It’s a surprise. It’s actually a nostalgia trip.” *Oskar? Are you there?*

Well, yes I am, my fairy. But I’m deeply engrossed in my silly game at the moment, so don’t expect an in-depth conversation from me. Ooops! That was a mistake. Damn! Now I have to go back and reset the track again... You were saying?

We’re going to Kensington Gardens. Can you hear me from there?

Just barely. But only if you shout really loud.

Ha, Ha! “Hannah, we’re going to stop at Kensington Gardens first. Is that okay?”

Yes, my fairy. I heard everything, Eli. Hi Oskar!

Hi Hannah. Bye Hannah.

Playing that silly game again are we?

Ha, Ha. Good one, Hannah. You two have fun, okay?

Eli spiraled slowly down over the park, making sure no one was in a position to see them, before she got too close. Once she determined all was clear, she feathered her wings and landed gracefully in the top of a tall tree near Round Pond. Hannah gingerly placed her feet on the branch and unhooked herself. They sat down together, feet dangling off the branch and watched the crowds of people walking along Bayswater. “How exciting! I wonder what they’d all think if they knew we were watching them?” she looked down through the branches into the darkness. “Eli, I don’t think it would be possible to climb this high from the ground. There aren’t enough big branches just below us.”

“Are you saying I couldn’t get here from there?” she grinned at her, leaned forward and reached out for a lower branch.

“No Eli! Please don’t. I take it back!”

“Okay, Hannah. I’d have to cheat anyway. I climbed this very tree when Papa brought me here with Oskar, way before I met you. But I used my claws and talons then.”

“You’re a fairy of many talents, Eli.”

“Hellloooo! Is someone up there?” A voice drifted up from the darkness below.

Eli and Hannah looked at each other.

“Whooooo wants to knooow?” Eli shouted.

Hannah giggled. “Eli, be quiet!” she whispered.

“What are you doooing up there?”

“We live up here! We’re baaaats!”

“Who is it Eli? Can you see?”

“Yeah. It’s a bunch of kids a few years older than us. And they’ve got beer with them.”

“Hoooww’d you get so hiiigh?”

“We flewww! Baaaats, remember?” Hannah shouted. She grinned at Eli.

“We’re coming uuuupp!” Eli saw three boys start up the tree, while several girls egged them on.

“Want a beeeer?” One boy, about a quarter of the way up now, waved a beer at them.

“No thaaaanks! I can’t drink and flyyyyy!” Eli shouted. “We’d better go Hannah,” she whispered. “Before they get too close and can see us.” She stood up on the branch and pulled Hannah to her feet.

“Eli, you’re not holding on to anything!”

Eli pretended to be surprised, “Oops. I forgot. I always forget.” She turned around still holding Hannah’s hand. “Fasten your seatbelt, Hannah.”

Hannah clipped her harness to Eli’s and wrapped her arms around her neck. “Ready, Eli.”

“Hold really tight, Hannah.” With a soft crackle, Eli unfurled her wings and held them straight out to her sides. This time, she leaped straight up into the air, clearing the last branches easily, then held her wings steady, allowing her body to lean into the natural arc of her trajectory. They floated away from the tree like a paper airplane. “Goooodbyyyyyy! We’re flying to our baaatcaaave noowww,” she shouted as they glided rapidly down towards Round Pond. Finally, at a safe distance from the tree, she flapped her wings hard, dodged a few trees, and quickly gained altitude over the bridge, climbing steadily until they were at a safe height once again.

Hannah, still giggling, kissed her on the cheek. “That was so much fun, Eli! I wonder what they’ll think when they get high enough to see that there’s no one there?”

“I suspect there’ll be a lot of arguing. The kids on the ground were following the sound of my voice, and they’ll swear we flew away.”

Hannah hugged her tighter. “Where to now, Eli?”

It’s a surprise. To me too. I just thought of it!” She turned and headed towards the cemetery. After about ten minutes, she descended quickly, circled overhead several times, then landed softly, feet first, next to the black tomb.

Hannah didn’t unhook herself. “Eli, what are we doing here? Oskar can’t hear you from here. We promised...”

I know, Hannah, but we’ll only be here a minute. Do you recognize where we’re standing?”

Hannah looked around, then suddenly got it. “Eli, we’re standing on the exact spot where you and your Mama went on your first flight together. When you became her butterfly!”

“And I’m going to take you on the same flight she took me on that night, Hannah. Then you can see for yourself what an amazing artist she is.”

“How cool is that?! Let’s go, Eli.”

Eli closed her eyes, visualizing that night so long ago. She strained herself to her limit, increasing the size of her wings as much as she could, then launched herself smoothly into the air. Off they flew toward the Thames, and Mama’s first living painting. She knew it wouldn’t be quite the same because there was a new moon; but it would still be wonderful. And she was still

strong! There seemed to be no limit to her strength. Hannah was as light as a feather. She felt like she could go on until dawn.

§

“What do you think, Hannah? Do you like them?” She suddenly realized how quiet Hannah had become during the tour. She could tell she was warm and happy, but did she really like it?

I simply love it Eli! And I love being with you. She pulled herself up and kissed her on the cheek. *I didn't realize how boring my life had been until I met you. I thought I was happy then, but I know I'm happy now. I guess it's all relative, isn't it? You're the best thing that's ever happened to me.* She laid her cheek on Eli's bare back, feeling the heat radiate off her body and listening to her strong, steady heartbeat. *My Kindred spirit!* It had a whole new depth of meaning to her now. Was it because she was older now; and was becoming an adult? An unanswerable question right now, she realized. And frankly, she didn't care.

She could hear Eli enthusiastically describing the next picture, and realized that she didn't even have to look herself. It was better when she saw it through Eli's own eyes. She let her own wander off into the darkness and between beautiful paintings, absently watched the lights and shadows in the distance change as they moved slowly across the city. And it was then she noticed for the first time the tiny dark spot that remained unchanged; that matched their pace exactly, rising when they rose, and sinking when they dove. It moved back when they banked left, and forward when they banked right. “Eli? What's that dark spot off to the right? Is it our shadow or something?”

“Where, Hannah?” Eli looked where Hannah was pointing.

She could feel Eli's muscles tense up; could feel her heart rate increase. Eli banked left and with fast, powerful strokes of her wings, surged forward. “We're going home now, Hannah. Hold tight!”

Hannah watched as the dark spot slowly moved back up beside them, matching their speed exactly, but moving no closer. They were back over Kensington Gardens again.

Eli, are you okay? What's wrong?

Oskar, get Mama! Someone's following us! Can you hear him?

No, Eli! As far as I can tell you're alone...wait! I think...no; for a second there, I thought...

Oskar, there's someone there! I can see him! She knew it was a vampire, but couldn't make out enough detail to identify him. *Den Fjärde* or *Den Sjätte*? Which one was it? Any why? Why now? She realized that with Hannah on her back, she was totally vulnerable. He could most likely kill them both easily. Why was he keeping his distance? Eli desperately increased her speed, but saw right away that he had matched it effortlessly.

I'm on my way, Butterfly! Keep flying straight toward the house as you are now. I'll be there in a couple of minutes!

"Mama? Please hurry!"

Mom's already out of sight, Eli. I'll let you know when she sees you. Oskar was shaking now. Damn! When will this all be over?!

No sooner had Elaine taken off than the dark spot veered off to the right and quickly vanished from sight, flying fast and low towards the cemetery.

It's almost as though he knew Mama was coming, Eli thought to herself. Oskar? Could you hear anything at all?

Nothing, Eli! It's almost as though he knew exactly how far he could go.

Eli spotted Mama just ahead. She dipped a wing at Eli, then headed at breakneck speed toward the cemetery.

Oskar! Tell Mama to stop! They might both be waiting for her! Maybe it's a trap! Please, Oskar!

She's coming back, Eli! She's coming back! She said to ask you 'How stupid do you think she is?'"

Within a matter of seconds, Mama pulled up next to her, smiling. Hannah waved to her wildly.

They flew home together, but Elaine dropped back behind them periodically, and circled back and forth beneath and above them. She was extremely nervous that Oskar hadn't been able to get a handle on which one it was. But one thing was certain; if one was there, so was the other. Alone, they were cowards. But they had apparently acquired a new skill: Masking their thoughts almost entirely from Oskar.

§

This time, Marcus was ready when the phone rang. He pushed the button on his recorder and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Have you picked a place?"

"Yes. Trafalgar Square."

"Time, 8:30PM, Friday night. That will give you two days to get all the material together. Is that satisfactory?"

"You're bringing the money with you?"

“Cash in assorted denominations. It all fits in a medium-sized wheeled suitcase.” There was a long pause. “And I expect all copies of the recording you’re making as we speak. Or no deal.”

“How did you...”

“No matter. It’s a deal-breaker. Are we agreed?”

“Whatever you say.”

“Good. And remember: I want everything. You are to retain absolutely nothing. No digital copies, no paper copies, no duplicates, no negatives, nothing.”

“You’re being repetitious. I got it the first time. I’m not a fool.” Marcus was becoming annoyed with him again, in spite of his misgivings.

“I’m glad to hear that. I don’t suffer fools. Life’s too short – especially for fools,” he said, icily.

Another threat! Marcus was getting nervous now. “How do I know you’ll leave me alone after the exchange? What guarantee do I have?”

“Other than the old adage, ‘There’s honor among thieves,’ you’ll just have to take my word for it. Just as I’m trusting you to give me everything.”

He resisted the urge to give him a piece of his mind. “How will I recognize you?”

“You won’t. I’ll recognize you.”

“How will I know it’s really you? I’m not going to hand these over to just anyone. And Trafalgar Square is hardly the place to open a suitcase with over a million pounds in it.”

“You can ask me for my name: Sava.”

“Okay, then, ‘Sava.’ Until Friday night.” He slammed the phone down hard. *That’ll show him I’m not afraid of his bullshit.* He popped open the recorder and tossed the tape on the bed. He was extremely nervous. If he gave them everything, what would keep them from coming after him? No, he had to keep at least the one set of photographs, no matter how dangerous it was. Besides, how would they ever know?

§

“What do you think it means, Rich?” Elaine poured Hannah another cup of tea.

“I’m not sure. But when Eli stopped at the cemetery, perhaps one of them spotted her. So it may mean nothing at all. It may have been mere curiosity, or an attempt by them to ascertain whether or not they, themselves, were being followed by us. If that’s the case, then everything he did was understandable. He didn’t continue following them because he either saw you coming, or figured

out that they were on their way home, and turned back. I think the fact that he could have killed them, but didn't, speaks volumes about his motives. They may be back, but their reasons do not include us. Perhaps we can do a bit of reconnaissance tomorrow, just to make sure it's them."

"I think you're right, Rich. It was most likely just a chance encounter."

"But next time, I expect to be going with you when you go off to rescue our children. I'll not let you leave me behind a second time."

"No offense, but you would have been worse than useless. I would have had three children to rescue if you had come. You fly like a baby bird. They would have eaten you alive."

Eli and Hannah giggled. "We want to watch when Mama teaches you, Papa. Would that be okay?"

He smiled at them. "Only if I can watch when you teach Hannah with an 'h'"

"Sure! You can watch while Eli teaches me. But it'll likely take her a long, long time. I don't think I'll be any good at it."

"I predict you'll be as good as Eli the day you get your wings. After all, you are a fairy princess."

"I'm too old for that stuff now, Dr. Dawson." She grinned at him. But she knew she really wasn't; in fact, her world had grown even rosier since the trip to the island. In her wildest dreams she could never have imagined a future anything like the one that she could see for herself at this very moment.

"I sincerely hope not, Hannah. Even Eli's mama isn't too old for that stuff, are you, Elaine?"

"Mama's not a fairy princess; she's the Queen."

That must make me the queen's consort, then." Papa winked at her.

"And don't you ever forget it, Rich." Elaine kissed him on the cheek.

Chapter 21: The Meeting

Marcus sat in front of his computer going over his notes. Archaeogenetics was a subsidiary of Genterapi Ltd. The Executive Director of Archaeogenetics, and also the CEO of Genterapi, was Doctor Jonathan Törnkvist. The provisional owner of both companies was a Doctor Richard Dawson, but the entire conglomerate was in a trust of some sort. The details were unavailable online. Both of them apparently lived in London. He wasn't able to track down Törnkvist, but he had managed to get Dawson's address from the Oxford directory, but it was an old one. He had no idea if he still lived there or not.

In fact, he had no idea whether or not Archaeogenetics had anything whatsoever to do with the – child-creatures he had seen, but he had to start somewhere. He had to get enough information to insure his safety.

As many times as he had visited the island, he knew that, no matter what was going on there, the area was expanding rapidly; he had seen three large homes go up in a matter of a couple of years. And since the names of both companies implied they did work with genetics, the odds were pretty good that they had produced these – things.

He sighed as he bent over his keyboard. He simply had to find something...

§

Richard opened the door to Hannah's beaming, ear-to-ear grin. "Hannah, don't you know by now you don't have to ring the bell? Just come on in when you get here."

"I know, but I like to guess who's going to answer the door. Hi, Dr. Dawson!" she handed him a rose. "Today, you get the prize."

He pretended to be shocked, "Hannah! You didn't pick one of Miss Anderson's roses did you?"

"No, No! I wouldn't do that. It's from our own garden at home... You're kidding me again, aren't you?"

"Would I do that?" His eyes twinkled, "But thank you for the rose, Hannah. I'll have to make sure I answer the bell more often."

"You're lucky it's in one piece. A kid almost sat on it on the bus. I almost smacked him!"

"Hannah! Come on up! You can help me slaughter Oskar at Riven. I've already almost caught up with him in about half the time!" Eli grabbed her arm and dragged her up the stairs.

"Bye, Dr. Dawson! Be sure to put that in water!" she disappeared around the corner.

Richard carefully put the rose in a small crystal vase, filled it with water, and put it in the center of the dining room table.

“Does Hannah always make an entrance like that?” Jonathan asked. He leaned over and smelled the rose. “Nice! It looks and smells like an American Chrysler Imperial. Yep! That’s what it is, I’m sure.”

Why Jonathan! I never knew you were into roses!”

“Elaine, there’s a lot you don’t know about me. I’ll have to take you on a tour of my greenhouse. It’s right next to my office on the island.”

“When do you find the time, Jonathan? I’ve never seen you not working.”

“It helps me retain my sanity, actually.”

“By the way, have you made any progress with that Marcus fellow? Have you found out what he wants yet?”

“We’ve made...inquiries, but I’ve heard nothing definitive at this point. All I know for sure is that he hasn’t made any more arrangements with the **News of the World** folks.”

“You don’t mean to tell me you have contacts there too!” Dawson exclaimed.

“You’d be surprised at the resources my father left me. Or perhaps not. You both knew him well enough to know that he would literally stop at nothing to protect Eli. This single-minded effort on his part has had a significant impact on our business model. Don’t worry about this. I’m confident we’ll get it resolved soon.”

Somehow, this was of no comfort to Elaine. She had always been uneasy about the ease with which Gudmund had crossed the line into darker areas where Eli was concerned.

§

Marcus looked at his watch. 8:25. He scanned the square, trying to figure out what this character might look like. From his vantage point on the steps, he could pretty much see everything. For over ten minutes he had carefully watched every bus as it stopped and unloaded. He had already checked out everyone on the square, and had dismissed them as potentials by this time. For starters, none of them had a suitcase large enough to fit the loose description the caller had given him. But he had to acknowledge that whoever he was, he may not be willing to just walk up to him with the suitcase. He wouldn’t have done it himself. No, he knew he would make sure the other guy was alone before he would risk that much money being taken from him. So, that left almost everyone – except the group of kids by the fountain, and the women. He guessed by the sound of his voice that this guy was probably over 40; he was also too...sure of himself to have been much younger than that in any case. So it could be any of about six or seven men who seemed to be content sitting on the steps or just walking quietly around the square. He couldn’t see anyone who really stood out.

8:35. He was late. Marcus was a bit nervous now. What if he didn't show? He had already called Sarah and told her he had a real surprise for her. All that money would certainly have won her back, and he'd be able to see his kids again, court order or not. He was sure she'd put up with his temper, once she realized how much better he'd be able to take care of her. He'd have a few fences to mend with the in-laws after some of his verbal indiscretions, but what the hell...with any luck...

"Hello, Marcus."

He stood up quickly and spun around. And stepped back. The man standing before him was a bit shorter than he was; about 168 centimeters, stocky, with a swarthy complexion and round face. His hair was black, thick, and chaotic despite his obvious attempts to tame it, but he was impeccably dressed in a black business suit, complete with unnaturally shiny shoes. In spite of that, there was something...ominous, almost threatening, about him. Perhaps it was the steely gaze, or more likely, his inability to read anything from the expression on his face. "Where'd you come from?" His eyes moved quickly to the black suitcase sitting on the step behind him.

"Where are the photographs?"

"Your name?"

"Can't be too careful, can we? My name is Sava."

"They're not here, but nearby. Do you think I'm stupid? What if you had come with others?" *But then, why did he bring the money with him? Wasn't he afraid also?* He nervously scanned the square. *Are there others with him?*

"I'm alone. As I told you I would be."

"Wait here. I'll get them. They're in a locker at the National Gallery." He looked at his watch: 8:45. He could just make it. He hated to leave all that money behind even for a few minutes, even though he knew 'Sava' wasn't going anywhere until he got back. His skin crawled as he headed quickly toward the main entrance; he could feel Sava's black eyes boring into the back of his head. He had the strong feeling that this guy was not going to put up with any bullshit from him tonight.

When he emerged with his portfolio, he saw that Sava was still standing exactly where he had left him, expressionless. He glanced around, making sure they were relatively isolated, then handed him the portfolio. Sava opened it up and thumbed through it briefly, almost as though he was just going through the motions rather than examining anything carefully. He lifted out the tape, turned it over examining it closely, then put it deliberately in his coat pocket.

"And the poster?"

"I was just pulling your leg. There's no poster. Not that I couldn't have made one, however. The photographs are quite detailed and very high resolution."

Sava stared at him for a moment, then, seemingly satisfied with his answer, passed the handle of the suitcase over to him.

“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, ‘Sava.’” He turned to go.

Sava put his hand firmly on his shoulder and squeezed hard, stopping him in mid-turn. “I’m taking you at your word. If I find out you’ve held out on me in any way...” he smiled at him, “you and I will meet again, under much less pleasant circumstances. Do you completely understand what I’m telling you?”

He jerked his shoulder away. “I told you I’ve given you everything. I’m a man of my word!” he said angrily. As difficult as it was, he decisively turned his back on him and headed off down the sidewalk with the suitcase. When he reached the corner, he glanced back, and saw him still standing there, hands on his hips, watching him intently. He slipped around the corner, lifted the heavy suitcase into the waiting cab, and slammed the door hard. He didn’t even begin to relax until they were well underway.

§

Richard hung up the phone. “Jonathan tells me that the problem with the photographs has been largely resolved. He thinks Marcus has made a deal with the Genterapi representative. He’ll let us know when the deal has been ‘finalized,’ as he put it.

“That’s a relief! And all without bloodshed, I assume.”

“I simply can’t believe that Jonathan would even entertain the idea, Elaine. He seems nothing like his father. His devotion to Eli is nearly as strong, but he has always been decent and warm-hearted. I’m sure your fears are unfounded.”

“Perhaps. But I just can’t shake the suspicion that there’s more to Jonathan than he lets us see. Look who his father was.”

“Well, in any case it sounds like nothing untoward happened. By the way, Jonathan also told me the Ejuice tests he conducted indicated that, as we expected, if you all each drink an average of a half-liter every two days as you have been doing, you should be able to maintain your peak abilities. The problem in the cave occurred because their systems weren’t fully adapted yet.” He looked at his watch. “Wasn’t Hannah supposed to be here by now? I think I heard the bus stop at the corner 10 minutes ago.” He looked out the window and saw Eli kicking a soccer ball around the back yard. “I’ll have Eli give her a call to make sure everything is all right.”

Richard had just reached the bottom of the stairs when the bell rang. He opened the door quickly, startling Hannah, who almost dropped the plate of cookies she was holding. “Dr. Dawson! You win again!” She pushed the cookies that were teetering on the edge, back onto the plate and handed it to him. “I made them myself! That’s why I was late and missed the bus, so I rode my bicycle instead.” She stuffed the empty paper bag back into her backpack and zipped it up.

Richard glanced at the bike, a bright red 12-speed with fenders, a standard handlebar, and a book rack on the back. “I haven’t seen that before. When did you acquire that magnificent machine?”

“Come on, Dr. Dawson! I’ve had it for years now! I used to ride it to school. I haven’t used it for a while now, but I didn’t want to wait for the next bus. I wouldn’t have gotten here for over an hour.”

“Wow! You rode your bike all the way over here? How long did it take you?” Eli brushed past Papa and grabbed a cookie off the plate.

“About 35 minutes. But the bus only beat me by 10,” she boasted. “I’m pretty fast.”

“Really? Let’s see! Take me for a ride!” Eli wolfed down the cookie, hopped off the porch and grabbed the handlebars. She squeezed the brakes and jerked on the gearshift levers.

“Don’t mess with the gearshifts, Eli. They don’t work unless you’re pedaling.”

“Really? Show me! Papa? Why didn’t I ever have a bike?”

Papa laughed, “Well, Eli, with everything else going on around here, it frankly never occurred to me that you would want one. Especially since, as a vampire, you’d only be able to ride at night safely, and at night, you had your wings. But if you want one now, we’ll get you one. And Oskar too.” He wondered why Oskar had never expressed an interest either, although he remembered that Oskar had ridden with Jack occasionally when they were kids together. He’d have to ask him about that when Jack brought him back from the lab.

“Can I try, Hannah?” She straddled the seat and grabbed the handlebars firmly. “What do I do now?”

“You can’t just get on a bike and expect to ride it right away, Eli. You have to practice.”

“I’ll bet I can do it, Hannah. Just tell me how.”

Okay, Eli, but be careful. Now you just sit on the seat, I’ll hold the bike steady, and you put your feet on the pedals...like that. Good! And for goodness sake, don’t put your feet in the stirrups until you’ve learned how to ride. Now put your hands on the handlebars. Okay, now. The bike is in low gear. You don’t need to change anything until you’re better at it. Now, I’m going to push you slowly and you’re going to start pedaling. When we get into the street, I’ll help you turn. If you start to fall...”

“I won’t fall, Hannah. Let’s go!”

“Wait a minute, Eli. Let me get my camera first. I can’t miss getting a movie of my little girl riding a bike for the first time.”

“Very funny, Papa. Hurry up!”

Papa ducked back into the house for a moment, returning quickly with Elaine and his video camera. “Okay, you’re on. Smile!” Eli and Hannah smiled for the camera.

“Okay, Eli! Let’s go.” Hannah gently pushed the bike down the driveway, and Eli started pedaling. Almost immediately, she poured on the coal and Hannah’s hands slipped off the back of the bike. “Eli, slow down! I can’t keep up, and you don’t know how to...”

“This is really cool! I have to have one of these, Papa! She bounced into the street, still gaining speed and was halfway across before she realized she was in trouble. “Hannah, I can’t get it to turn!” The front wheel wobbled back and forth as she tried to figure out what to do, but it was no use. She flashed across the road, still pedaling hard, bounced over the low curb into Jack and Henry’s front yard and disappeared completely into the thick bushes next to the house, accompanied by the sound of breaking branches and scraping metal. Then silence.

Papa, Elaine and Hannah rushed over, just as Mrs. Shaw flung open the door and rushed outside. “Eli, what on earth are you doing?! Have you hurt yourself?”

The bike was still upright in the bushes, apparently intact, but Eli was lying flat on her back on the grass with a big grin on her face. “I’m fine, Mrs. Shaw. But did I hurt your bushes?” She jumped up and brushed herself off. “Hannah! Did I hurt your bike?” She snatched it out of the bushes and examined it carefully, then handed it to Hannah.

“It looks okay to me, Eli. A few new scratches, but they blend in nicely with the old ones. I told you, you couldn’t do it right the first time. Even fairies need practice at riding a bike.”

Mrs. Shaw insisted that Eli come inside to get cleaned up. Her eagle eye spotted a few scrapes and scratches, so she proceeded to clean them up thoroughly. “I should have had Jack teach you how to ride a bike years ago! In fact, I’m going to give him a piece of my mind for not having done so! The very idea of a girl your age not knowing how to ride a bike...” she grumbled to herself.

It’s our fault, Maggie.” Elaine said, apologetically. “She never expressed an interest, and we just never got around to it.”

“No matter!” Maggie said. “I’m sure Hannah will correct our error for us. Now get along, and stay out of my bushes!” she swatted Eli on the behind.

Hannah giggled as they wheeled the bike back across the street. “Jack’s mom is so nice! I’m glad she finally agreed to have the injection. But Jack told me it took Henry and him a long time to convince her.”

“I want you girls back before dark,” Elaine warned. “Or else your Papa and I will bring all the neighbors over and show them our new film.”

“Don’t you dare, Mama!” Eli grabbed the bike away from Hannah. “And you’re not off the hook. Would you take me for a ride so I can see how to turn? I’ve seen kids ride on the handlebars with each other. Can I do that?”

“You’re too big for that, Eli. I couldn’t steer or see with you in front. Just sit on the book rack and put your feet on the pegs down by the wheel hub, but be careful not to get your foot caught in the chain. Here, let me show you.” Eli sat down on the back, and Hannah steadied the bike while she placed her feet on the pegs. “Exactly like that. Then put your arms around my waist...” she straddled the bike, pushed off smoothly, flipped the pedals over and slipped her feet into the stirrups in one smooth motion. And they were off.

Hannah showed Eli how to lean into the turns and even took her hands off the handlebars to show her how the bike turned itself if you leaned just right. They rode back and forth up and down the street in front of the house, venturing further and further away until, before they realized it, they were many blocks north of the house.

“Let’s see how fast we can go, Hannah. How fast can you make it back to the house?”

She made a quick u-turn, dodging an old fiat that had pulled up to the curb behind them. “Not as fast as I could alone, Eli, but let’s see...” she stood up and pumped as hard as she could until they were almost flying along the street. From there to the house was a gentle down-hill slope, so building up speed was much easier than she had expected. They were having so much fun by this time that they didn’t see the old fiat make a quick u-turn behind them; and if they had been more attentive, they would have noticed it parked unobtrusively next to the path to the duck pond at the same time Eli flew into the bushes.

They were going so fast now that Hannah was a bit worried that they wouldn’t be able to make the turn next to the house. “Faster, Hannah! Go faster!” Hannah, caught up in the moment, suddenly felt invincible.

“Okay, Eli! Here we go!” She put everything she had into it as they approached the corner at breakneck speed. “Lean hard, Eli!” The bike laid over hard to the right as they went around the corner. Hannah could feel the back tire just beginning to lose its grip on the pavement and prayed that Eli’s extra weight on the back would make the difference. Fortunately, it did. She had never cornered that fast before in her life!

The bike snapped upright as they hit the straightaway and Hannah poured on the coal once again, anticipating the two-block straight shot to the turn before the stream. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted the Fiat rounding the corner behind them. “Is that someone you know, Eli?”

Eli turned around to look. After that, everything that happened, happened quickly. Eli’s foot turned on the right peg, the heel of her shoe disappeared into the blur of the back wheel spokes and snapped off like a twig, throwing fragments of bent spokes everywhere. The back wheel seized up and twisted on its axis, ripping the tire to shreds on the fender, which buckled up and snapped the support on the book rack. The bike skidded hard to the right, then back to the left as Hannah overcorrected, throwing Eli into the street, where she skidded along on her back, hit the

curb hard and rolled up onto the grass by the cobblestone path. Hannah, hands still tightly gripping the handlebars, stayed with the bike until it finally hit the curb hard, flipped completely end over end, and dumped her into the copse next to the path. Fortunately, what was left of the bike missed her by inches as it smacked into a tree and fell back next to her, by now an almost unrecognizable mass of twisted metal.

Eli watched in a daze as the Fiat slowly pulled to the curb just ahead of them. A tall muscular man exited the car, grabbed a camera off the seat and hurried back along the sidewalk. He looked around carefully, then cautiously walked up to Hannah's motionless form, knelt down and pressed his finger to her neck, snapped a couple of pictures, then slowly stood and walked deliberately up to Eli. She instinctively closed her eyes, pretending to be unconscious while he took several pictures of her also. He crouched down beside her, took a couple of close-ups of her face, then gently lifted her bare arm and examined it closely on all sides. He crouched there quietly for a moment, then abruptly stood up and hurried back to his car. If she had opened her eyes even for a moment as he knelt before her, she would have seen the large knife he slowly took from his pocket, held tremblingly in front of him, and then lowered, as his resolve weakened. She only opened them when she sensed him moving away from her toward the car. As he drove away, Eli memorized the license number.

As soon as he was out of sight she rushed over to Hannah, who was lying on her side in the brush, staring at Eli as she approached. "Hannah! Are you okay?!"

Hannah sat up and grinned at her. "Was that fast enough for you?"

Eli grinned back. "Only the last 10 meters or so! Did you see that man?"

"Yep! I guess you didn't know him, huh? Boy was that creepy! I...guess I must've had the breath knocked out of me or something, because for a minute or two I couldn't move a muscle. I saw him coming, but the odd look in his eyes kind of scared me, so I closed my eyes."

"I did the same, Hannah. There was something...not right about him." She stood up and helped Hannah to her feet. "Boy are you a mess! Your shorts are torn and your arm is all scraped up. And your head is bleeding a little." She reached up and touched the side of her head.

"Ouch! I guess I must have banged it on something, huh." She gasped as she saw her bike for the first time. "Wow! I guess I can't fix that, can I? How sad! I really liked that bike."

Eli stepped over and picked it up. "Papa and Jack can fix it. They can fix anything!" With the bike in one hand and her other arm around Hannah, they hobbled back up the street to the house.

Papa saw them coming and hurried out to meet them. "Are you two all right? What on earth happened?"

Eli took off her shoe and showed it to him. "It was my fault, Papa. I got my shoe caught in the spokes and broke Hannah's bike. Can you and Jack fix it?" she handed him what was left of the bike.

“I don’t think so, Eli. It’s a goner. It’s impossible to straighten an aluminum frame like this. We’ll just have to get Hannah a new one, since this was your fault.” He leaned the bike against the porch and followed them both inside.

Eli grinned at Hannah. “We’ll get them both exactly alike. You can pick them out, since I don’t know anything about bikes. Papa, a strange man was following us in his car, and right after the accident, he stopped and took pictures of both of us before we got up. I got his license number.” Eli wrote it down on the pad next to the phone and handed it to him. “Hannah bumped her head, Mama. Do you think it’s okay?” Elaine sat Hannah down at the kitchen table, grabbed a washcloth and cleaned her wound.

“Wait a minute! You said a man stopped and took pictures of you both lying on the ground and didn’t do anything to help you?” Papa said angrily.

“Yes, Papa. He was kind of creepy. He looked at us as though we were...roadkill or something.” She looked at Hannah, who nodded in agreement. “That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Hannah’s just fine, Rich. It’s just a bump.” She grabbed Eli by the arm and spun her around. “You, on the other hand, sustained more serious injuries. You’d best have a little extra today.” She handed her a bottle of Ejuice.

Papa gasped, “Eli, the back of your shirt is almost gone, and your back is still black and blue!”

“When I fell off the bike, I slid on the road a bit before I rolled up on the grass, Papa.” He watched, relieved, as the bruises and cuts continued to fade and heal.

Papa sat down next to her. “I think we need to discuss those bikes now, Eli. First there are going to be some ground rules...” *I have to get this license number to Jonathan. Something very odd is going on here, and I don’t like it.*

Chapter 22: The Payoff

Marcus couldn't believe his good luck. He also couldn't believe what he had seen. *There were two of them, identical in every way. Just like the Clone Army in "Star Wars" Are there even more of them? How about the boy?*

After examining the photographs carefully, he was convinced that they were clones; exactly alike, right down to the freckle on their chins. This was indeed a dark discovery. His first inclination was to go to the Church about it. This was bigger than him, bigger even than his good fortune, although he had absolutely no intention of giving up the money, no matter how damned the source. It was the only way he could get his family back. He knew Sarah had always distrusted the Church intently, but he was convinced he'd be able to bring her around...one way or another. It was absolutely essential. It was a major part of his life's mission.

At any rate, he was sure his safety was no longer an issue. He had enough information to make life very uncomfortable for these...whatever they were. They would never risk exposure. But as he became more and more certain that these were not only Godless things, but that what they were doing probably had some dark satanic purpose, he became more convinced that he had to go to the Church. Pastor Rawlings would know better than he, what they should do with this information. And it couldn't help but improve his standing in the Church, which, as a community, could help him keep his family in line once they were back. Not exactly the purest of motivations, he knew, but Jesus had said 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.' And Sarah was his.

He examined the photographs again, reluctantly acknowledging the girls' unearthly beauty, but deeply disgusted by its implication. And he knew that their unnatural beauty was the prime reason he couldn't kill them when he had the chance. He was painfully aware and deeply ashamed that he had been sexually aroused by one of them as she stood naked at the cave entrance. But that was clear evidence of the evil that resided in her and all her clones; that they could so easily make him forget his God, even for a moment. *Maybe I should have just...finished them when I had the chance. No one would have seen. I could have just...* He pulled out his knife and opened it, examining the finely-honed blade. A wave of anger washed over him as he thought about how easily they had, even as they lay there unconscious, exploited his weakness. He wouldn't let it happen a second time.

§

"I can't believe it, Rich! What kind of man would do such a thing?" Jonathan was absolutely furious.

"That's what we want you to find out." He handed him the license number. "Eli wrote this down for me. She memorized it as he drove away."

Jonathan chuckled, "Leave it to Eli. Okay, Rich, I'll check it out. Believe it or not, I have contacts at Scotland Yard, too."

“Why am I not surprised? By the way how’s the Marcus whatever-his-name-is situation going? Any resolution yet?”

“It’s a done deal, Rich. Our man hasn’t given me his final report yet, but the exchange was made last Friday.”

“How much did it cost us?”

“A million and a half.”

“My God! How much did he ask for initially?”

“He didn’t. He was made that offer first off, and he accepted it.”

“Why so much, Jonathan?”

“We thought we’d be better off if we sort of purchased his good will. We didn’t think it was worth the risk that he might hold something back for the future if we drove too hard a bargain.”

“And you’re sure you can trust your man?”

“Unequivocally. He’s been with the firm for years. Totally trustworthy.”

§

“Marcus, I told you I’m done. I don’t want to see you any more and I don’t want you to see the children. I simply can’t trust you.”

“Sarah, I’ve come into some money; a lot of money. Enough so you could have anything you wanted.”

“No matter how much money you had, it wouldn’t be enough.”

“I’ve got a million and a half, tax free. How does that grab you?!”

“Where’d you get that kind of money, Marcus? Frankly I doubt that you earned it. You’re too much of a loser.”

He tried to remain calm. “Sarah, you and the boys belong with me. You know how I feel about the sanctity of marriage; it’s ‘Till death do us part.’”

“You should have thought of that while you were beating on Gary! That was a deal-breaker for me, Marcus. No matter how much money you have, you’re still a bully and a jerk!”

“Sarah, you have to give me another chance...”

“And I’m going to talk to my lawyer tomorrow. Since you’ve come into all this money, I think it’s about time you started keeping your child support payments up to date.” She slammed down the phone.

“Who does she think she is? She’ll not keep my children from me!” Marcus was furious. All his plans were up in the air now. He paced back and forth rapidly. *I’ve got to fix this!* His thoughts turned to Pastor Rawlings and the Church. They were his last chance. Some of their methods of persuasion were a bit unorthodox, but at the same time quite effective; and Sarah had been a member of the Church, albeit a reluctant one, before she left him. He had to make sure his marriage became as important to them as it was to him, but how could he play his ace without revealing the fact that he had taken a payoff from them? He had absolutely no intention of sharing his good fortune with the Church. Perhaps a more meaningful gesture, to prove beforehand that he had recognized the apocalyptic nature of their very existence...

§

Oskar and Hannah sat on the low fence in front of the house and watched as Eli, perched proudly on her beautiful blue bike and wearing her new black biking shorts and light-blue shirt purchased just for the occasion, wobbled down the street in front of the house, made a wide, shaky U-turn at the end of the block and wobbled back. She waved as she passed by, momentarily lost control, then smiled broadly at them as she straightened herself out and, with a bit more confidence, rounded the corner past the house and disappeared.

“Give her another half-hour and she’ll be as good as I am, Hannah. Especially now that she has her strength and sense of balance back. And you’re a good teacher. She listens to you, where she won’t listen to me.”

“It’s not that you’re not a good teacher. Your handicap is that you’re Oskar.” she grinned at him. “And she can’t resist giving you a hard time, no matter how good your intentions.”

“Well, you’re still a good teacher, Hannah. And since you rode your bike to school for years, you’re a better cyclist than me anyway. I haven’t ridden regularly for years. I really don’t mind that she’s learning from you.”

They turned simultaneously and watched her swing back around the corner – and gasped when they realized she was going much too fast. They both stood up quickly, expecting to have to scrape her and her new bike off the sidewalk, but to their surprise, she leaned into the turn perfectly and after a bit of over-correction, hit the straightaway smoothly, and sailed past them wagging her ‘V’ for victory at them triumphantly. After making a perfect ‘U’ turn down by the stream, she stood up, leaned over the handlebars and accelerated unnaturally fast up the street, finally slamming on the brakes right in front of them and skidding to a stop.

“See Hannah? I did it right this time! I used the back brake first, then the front one!” She jumped off the bike, put down the kickstand and plopped down between them on the fence. “Let’s ride over to your house, Hannah! I want to show Jason how good I’m getting. By the time we get there, I should be as good as Oskar at this!”

Oskar sighed, shrugged his shoulders, and grinned at Hannah.

“And Oskar? On the way, you can show me when I should shift gears. I’ll follow your lead until I’m sure I’ve got it, okay?”

“Sure, Eli.” He knew she was just trying to make him feel better about being left ‘out of the loop;’ but it had worked. He felt better. “Let’s get our backpacks, fill our water bottles, and call Jason, Hannah.”

“I know! I’ll ask Mom if she’ll make us a lunch. Jason and I know some really neat places to ride, and there are some beautiful meadows alongside the road where we can have a picnic.” She grabbed Eli’s hand and they rushed inside together.

After promising Papa that she wouldn’t do anything overly stupid, they were finally on their way.

“Eli, please don’t go too fast. Remember, I’m just a human being,” Hannah pleaded.

“We won’t, Hannah, I promise. In fact, why don’t you take the lead? I’ll ride beside Oskar so he can show me the gear changes.” She dropped back beside Oskar, and Hannah swung around the corner north of the house, ahead of them.

Marcus quickly set the directional mike back on the dashboard and started up his new Range Rover. He pulled away from the curb, drove slowly past the house and around the corner after them.

§

By the time they pulled their bikes into Hannah’s front yard, Eli was sure she knew all there was to know about riding a bike. “I don’t know why it took you so long to learn this Oskar. It’s so easy!”

“I learned when I was four, Eli.” He said sarcastically. “My first bike had training wheels and no gears, and I had to ride it on the sidewalk. It severely limited my options. I didn’t get a real bike until I was eight, and even that one didn’t have gears or handbrakes. It had Bendix brakes.”

“What’s that?”

“See? You don’t know everything about bikes after all, do you? It’s brakes built into the back wheel hub. You just back-pedaled and the brakes in the hub engaged. It actually made it harder for me when I got my first 12-speed, because I smacked into a lot of stuff before I remembered not to back-pedal to stop.”

“Aww! Poor little Oskar!” Eli ducked as he swung at her.

Hannah stepped out on the front porch and zipped up her backpack. “I’ve got a big blanket, some sunscreen, and bug repellent. The sunscreen’s for you, Eli. You’re still kind of ...white.”

“Thanks, Hannah, but I don’t think I’ll need it. Now that I heal myself, I probably can’t even tan anymore.”

“Wow! I hadn’t even thought of that. Does that mean that if I get the shot, I’ll lose my tan?”

“I don’t know, Hannah. Maybe if you’re tan when you get the shot, you’ll stay that way.”

“And if that’s the case, does that mean that you’ll be stuck with the same tan line the rest of your life? Even if the bathing suit styles change? That doesn’t sound so good to me,” Oskar teased.

“You’re right Oskar. If I want to keep a tan, then I’d better make sure I’m tan all over, huh?” she grinned at him.

“Well! Are we ready to go?” Jason wheeled his bike out the back gate and adjusted his backpack. “Where to, Sis?”

“How about Buttonhole Lane, Jason? And we could come back by way of Laurel Farm and Totteridge Green.”

“Sounds good! Let’s go.” He slung his leg over his bike and rode out into the street.

“What about lunch, Jason? Mom said...”

“I’ve got everything, Hannah! You worry too much.” He circled around in the street impatiently.

“Cups? Plates? Napkins?”

“Mom packed it. How should I know?”

“Okay then. Why didn’t you say so? Let’s go everybody.” Hannah pulled out behind Jason, and Eli and Oskar brought up the rear. They didn’t notice the dark green Range Rover parked on Twineham Green across Tillingham as they headed right, towards Southover.

It pulled onto Tillingham behind them, moving slowly until Marcus saw that they had turned Left; then he pulled up to the corner, consulted his map, drew a circle around the near end of Buttonhole Lane, and waited until they were a block past Old Finchlean’s before he followed.

“Southover turns into Chanctonbury Way here,” Jason said. “We’ll make a right on Argyle a bit further along. Stay close to the curb, Eli. There’s a lot of traffic ahead.”

“Thanks, Jason.” She dropped back behind Oskar and followed Jason’s lead as he threaded his way around parked cars and pedestrians. Hannah quickly dropped back behind her.

“You’re doing really well, Eli. But make sure you don’t ride over the grates by the curb. The tires are pretty thin and could drop right into some of the old ones. Believe me, I know.”

Eli looked up just as Jason disappeared around the corner on Argyle, and hurried to catch up.

“That’s where we got our computer, Oskar.” Jason pointed at the small computer store at the intersection. “And the Riven series games too.”

“That’s a really good sandwich place next door, Eli. Mom and I sometimes eat there while Jason and Dad do their shopping. Together, they’re worse than we are, and I love shopping,” Hannah whispered. She pulled up beside Eli as soon as the traffic thinned out a bit. “It’s all houses from here on until the school and stables. Then everything starts to get pretty.”

Marcus turned right on Argyle, then sped up and passed them. He thought fleetingly about how easy it would be to just turn into them, knock them off their bikes and run them over, but the chances of being able to get away with it with so many people around were slim to none.

Since he knew where they were headed, he figured that he would turn around just past their anticipated next turn and wait for them; that way they were less likely to notice that he was following. That would also give him a chance to listen in on them as they approached, in case there were a change of plans. All he knew was that he had to get them alone. It was the only way he could finish them safely. Only then would he go to the Church, where Pastor Rawlings and a select few members of the congregation could more easily handle the others. That is, if he could convince them that he was right, and that these...whatever they were, were the harbinger of the apocalypse.

§

“Have you ever ridden a horse, Eli?” Hannah leaned her chin on her handlebars as they waited for the horse trailer to complete its turn into the Equestrian Centre.

Of course, Hannah. I grew up on a farm, remember?”

“That’s not a real horse, Eli. Hannah means a real trained riding horse.” Jason teased.

“What do you mean? Our horse could have made hash out of these scrawny lightweights. It would take three of these weaklings to pull the plow that Blackie could drag around a field all day without working up a sweat!”

“Blackie? Boy, what an imaginative name – for a dog! Let me guess...he was black, right?” Jason grinned at her.

“No, actually he was white! We named him Blackie to confuse the dim bulbs in the neighborhood...and you!” She pulled out around him in a huff, dodged past the rear end of the trailer, and accelerated down the street.

“Eli! You have to turn right on Partingdale!” Hannah shouted.

Eli slammed on the brakes, did a tight U-turn in the middle of the street, nearly hitting a dark green Range Rover parked at the curb, then disappeared down Partingdale.

Marcus raised his head and watched her race down the street. *Nobody can accelerate that fast. At least no normal person...* He felt a twinge of fear. He had to be very careful. In retrospect, he had no idea what additional abilities they might have, and there were now four of them. He had seen them fly and drink blood. Now he could infer strength. Their other abilities, whatever they were, were still locked inside their black box.

By the time the others caught up with her, Eli was already at the jog in the road, waiting. Jason passed her, smiling, turned right in front of her, and pulled off the road in front of a locked gate. “And this is it! We have to walk the bikes around the gate, then you and Hannah can pick a spot, Eli. The best ones are after we turn right at the end of the straight stretch of Buttonhole Lane. From then on, you can’t see the ugly switchyard. Come on Eli! I’ll race you!” He knew she’d win, but it would put her in a better mood. Sometimes he couldn’t tell until it was too late when he’d inadvertently pushed one of her buttons.

“How much of a head start do you want, Jason? A kilometer? Two?”

“How about five seconds, Eli?” He jumped on his bike and took off, a cloud of dust and spray of gravel trailing behind him.

“...Three...Two...One...” and she was off. Hannah grinned at Oskar and the two of them rode quietly together, side by side, each in their own rut.

“You’re right, Hannah. It’s really beautiful out here.”

“Wait ‘till you see the meadow I’ve picked, Oskar. It’s really pretty and you can’t see a single house or anything from there. It’s like we’re out in the middle of nowhere.” She picked up speed in anticipation, and felt the wind blow her hair back and the sun on her face; and Oskar’s gentle, smiling face next to her. She was so happy, she felt a lump in her throat. She reached over, lightly touched his hand and smiled at him. He squeezed her hand gently, blushed, and looked away.

“I’m sorry, Oskar! I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“You didn’t Hannah. I embarrassed myself.” Oskar knew that there were many kinds of love, but sometimes it was hard for him to sort them all out and keep them separate. And sometimes when one blended into another, it caught him by surprise. “Sometimes, I really love you, Hannah. And other times, I really, really love you.” He blushed again. “I...I mean...”

“I know what you mean, Oskar. And right now, I ‘really, really’ love you too.” She reached over and brushed his cheek.

They rode on in warm, comfortable silence together.

§

Marcus cursed to himself, once he realized the gate was locked. He absolutely had to capitalize on this opportunity. He hesitated a moment, then jumped out of the car, grabbed his bolt cutters out of the back and made short work of the chain. He drove through quickly and closed the gate behind him. They were so far ahead of him now, he couldn't see them at all. He simply had to get within sight of them before they reached the intersection, just in case they changed their minds. He was so close now, he couldn't afford to lose track of them.

§

"Wanna do it again?" Eli grinned at Jason as he pulled up beside her. "Ten seconds this time?"

"Nope! But just you wait until I get the shot. Then you'll have to work harder for it."

By the time Hannah and Oskar caught up, Eli and Jason were lying on their backs relaxing in the tall grass. "What took you so long, Oskar? We're getting hungry."

"We're not stopping here, Eli. Oskar and I'll show you where." They sped up and swung around the corner to the right along the narrow tree-lined road. Jason and Eli hopped on their bikes and followed behind them.

The road dipped and rose between each field, creating small picture-perfect landscapes, each uniquely sprinkled with assorted flowers and small bushes, depending on the whims of nature and the crops that had grown there back when the area was actively farmed. Eli knew immediately that they had reached Hannah's field as soon as it became visible over the rise in the road. It looked like something out of a fairytale, with all the different colored wildflowers and clover in random patches, and small, almost miniature, oak trees haphazardly dotting the field. The tree-lined berm surrounding it on three sides almost seemed to be protecting it from the starker outside world, and the relatively unadorned fields surrounding it.

"What do you think Oskar?! Isn't it pretty?"

"Fit for a fairy princess, Hannah. It's perfect!!"

They parked the bikes in the shade of a huge Oak tree alongside the road and carried their backpacks to a particularly pretty spot near the northern berm, right in the center between three perfect little Oak trees. Hannah laid out the blanket and Oskar and Eli set the food out and distributed the plates, cups and napkins.

"Ham and cheese! I love ham and cheese sandwiches." Oskar put one on his plate, leaned back against a tree, and dug in.

"Oskar! It's not polite to start until everyone's served!" Hannah said, sternly.

“You sound like Mom, Hannah!” Jason grabbed a sandwich and took a big bite out of it.

“Heathens!” Hannah plopped down next to Eli and grabbed a sandwich for each of them.

§

Marcus laid his rifle on the ground next to the tree, and adjusted the binoculars. The girls had their backs to him, but he could see the boys clearly. One was obviously the same one he had seen at the cave, but the other was plainly older. *Do they all have these abilities? There's no way to know for sure. The older boy clearly lives in the house on Twineham Green with one of the clones, so the odds are good that he has them also. But I know the girls and the blond boy do. So I have to get them first. But which one? The girl had seemed to be the dominant personality at the cave. She led all the flights through the eye, drank his blood, and carried him away from the cave. It might be best to take both girls out first, in that case. But if the older boy has the abilities, he's probably the Alpha Male in the group. On the other hand, the girl in the white shorts seemed to be leading this time, and since she was with the blond, she was probably the one at the cave. But then, why was she living with the older boy?* His head was spinning. At 100 meters, he knew he'd only be able to take out two of them quickly if he was very lucky. He wasn't that good at rapid-fire, especially with a bolt-action Winchester. After that, the survivors would be running...or flying.

He lay down next to the tree, picked up his rifle, and adjusted the scope. He decided against a head shot; he could miss entirely and that would be the end of the game. He settled the crosshairs on the small of her back, took a deep breath, slowly squeezed the trigger and fired. He held his breath. Her head suddenly snapped back, hair flying, her body jerked forward and she dropped like a rock. The report of the rifle echoed against the treeline as three sets of eyes turned towards him.

Chapter 23: Confrontations

Hannah screamed. “Eli!!” She lunged for her, saving her own life in the process. “Oskar!! She’s bleeding!”

Oskar instinctively looked toward the sound of the shot, heard the buzz of the second bullet as it passed between them, then heard the shot a split second later.

“Get down flat on the ground!” Oskar yelled. He rolled over next to Eli, turned her over and saw the blood gushing out of a gaping hole in her neck. Her eyes were open and her arms were limp at her sides. Jason grabbed Hannah’s hand, crouched down and dragged her behind the nearest tree, even though the small trunk offered them virtually no cover at all. He threw her to the ground and lay on top of her.

Oskar frantically put his hands around Eli’s neck trying to stem the blood flow, but there was too much. Eli’s hand slid under his and he watched in horror as her finger disappeared deep into the wound, but at least the blood stopped flowing. He stood up and grabbed her around the shoulders in an attempt to drag her behind a low bush, but Eli reached up with her other hand and pulled him back down. “Don’t, Oskar!” she croaked. “If he hits you in the head, it could...” she coughed. “Give me a few minutes, and I’ll be fine” she whispered. “Are Jason and Hannah okay?”

“We’re fine, Eli,” Hannah shouted.

§

Marcus cursed “Damn! She moved!” He realized he had blown it. “Only one! I only got one!” Enraged, he stood up, raised the gun to his shoulder and leaned against the tree to steady himself. He fired several times more and saw the resulting geysers of dirt as the rounds missed their mark. After sending a couple more rounds into the tree, he threw his arms up in frustration, then turned as he heard the sound of a small motorbike approaching from behind him. A young boy was moving rapidly along the road about 200 meters behind him, but clearly hadn’t seen him yet. Fearing that there could be others, he tossed the rifle in the back, jumped into the car and, with a roar, accelerated down the berm into the field. *Maybe I can get the rest of them with the car.*

§

Oskar watched Eli’s condition rapidly deteriorate, as round after round churned up the dirt around him. He could hear the dull thunk every time a round struck the tree in front of Jason and Hannah.

Helplessly, he watched the slowly diminishing rise and fall of Eli’s chest in horror as she gradually began losing her battle to stay alive long enough to heal. *Do you have to breathe, Eli? When you were a vampire, you didn’t have to breathe!*

I...I have to breathe Oskar. I'm not...that anymore. I have to breathe. He could feel her slipping away from him.

Eli, please don't die. You can't die! You simply ...can't. In an instant, the stark reality of her mortality was driven home to him. *Nothing lasts forever*, Dad had told them. A wave of anguish and loneliness washed over him. He pulled himself up next to her, and pressed his cheek against hers, literally willing her to heal. And waited for the shooting to stop.

Suddenly, he heard the roar of a car engine and raised himself up on his elbows. A Range Rover with a heavily reinforced push bar and winch on the front was heading straight for them across the meadow, bouncing over the rocks and uneven earth like a huge, lumbering beast. "Hannah! You and Jason run for the bikes and go for help!" He tore off his shirt, put his arms at his sides, and grew his wings. "Go! Run, run, run!!" They both leaped up and ran for the road.

He knew he couldn't carry her; she was too busy trying to breathe to be able to hang on. There was only one thing to do. He ran swiftly toward the approaching Range Rover and lifted off with a powerful thrust of his wings. Eli slowly rolled over and watched him go. *Oskar, I...* Her eyes slowly closed.

I can do this! Oskar's blind rage made him absolutely fearless. *I'll kill him! I'll kill him! I'll kill him!*

Marcus gasped. *He's got wings! And he's coming for me!* He quickly rolled up the window. He gasped again as he saw the girl he had shot, roll over. He jammed his foot down on the accelerator. *At least I'll finish this one!*

Oskar had already covered half the distance between them before Marcus realized what was about to happen. *My God! He's going to...* He jerked the wheel sharply to the right, but it was too late. With a meaty thud, Oskar struck his windshield dead center, then instantly disappeared over the top of the car. The resulting massive spiderweb of fractured glass suddenly made the windshield almost completely opaque. He skidded to a stop, and rolled down the window, suddenly terrified. *Where are the others?* The clone, on her bike, was speeding away toward the Laurel Farm House and probably the visitor's center just past the next field. The older boy, also on his bike, was heading straight towards him across the meadow, and the Moped had already passed the berm and was approaching from behind. Cursing, he spun the car around and headed straight for the road. He knew there was a constable at the visitors' center and he couldn't risk being identified yet; and the Moped complicated things even more. He pulled onto the road and headed back towards the gate as fast as he could go, crouched low over the wheel, peering through the only remaining section of unfractured glass. He didn't see Hannah spin her bike around and head back across the field toward Eli.

With a tremendous effort, Eli finally managed to get up on her hands and knees. After coughing up the accumulated blood, her breathing slowly began to improve. But she almost died again when she saw Oskar hit the windshield, flip over and over in the air, and land hard on the ground behind the Range Rover. *He's dead! I know it! He's dead!* Oskar's presence, always there in the back of her mind, was suddenly gone. She watched helplessly as a boy on a Moped pulled up

beside Oskar, immediately followed by Jason, who threw his bike to the ground and crouched down beside him. She stumbled to her feet just as Hannah arrived, and together they made their way across the field toward the three of them.

The boy hesitated a moment. *Wings! He has wings! I DIDN'T imagine it!* He didn't know what to do; what he could safely touch without causing more damage. Everything felt surreal to him. He was kneeling next to the unconscious body of a boy with wings, who should be dead after he smacked into the windshield, but he wasn't. He could see the regular rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He raised his head as the kid on the bike, about his own age, skidded to a stop beside him and gently but firmly moved him aside and crouched down next to the unconscious boy. He gasped as the problem suddenly became moot. The wings became intangible, turned to white lace, and retracted back into the boy's arms.

"Do you have a phone?" Jason asked.

"Yes, I do!" He handed it to him.

Jason dialed home, "Dad? There's been an accident! Someone tried to kill us all! We're at the 4th field off Buttonhole Lane; you know, Hannah's meadow. Someone in a dark green Range Rover shot Eli, then tried to run her over. She's hurt and so is Oskar, really bad....okay Dad. Please hurry!"

"My grandfather's farm is back along the lane. I'll call him. He can get here much faster!"

"No! Please don't. We can handle this ourselves!" Jason realized how he must have sounded. After all, this guy didn't have to stop. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be abrupt."

Hannah rushed ahead of Eli, worried about the strange boy, with Oskar lying there unconscious and maybe even seriously hurt. "Jason, is he okay? He's not moving!"

"He's breathing, Hannah. I don't know any more than that."

"His...wings went away just as I got here. But I saw his arms move just a bit," the boy volunteered.

Hannah looked at him closely for the first time. "I'm ... Hannah. This is my brother Jason. And that's Eli." She nodded towards her rapidly-approaching soul mate. "Thanks for stopping to help."

Oskar's eyes opened. "Who the hell are you?" he tried to get to his feet, but Jason held him down.

"Relax, Oskar. He's not the one. He's long gone. This is...?"

"Ryan. My name is Ryan. Glad to meet you, Oskar. Whatever you are." His head was swimming.

“He saw your wings, Oskar. And I’m sure he saw the car, and at least heard the gunfire. And he still stopped to help you.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He rolled over at the sound of Eli’s footsteps. “Eli! You’re alive! I thought you were...” he couldn’t finish the incomprehensible thought. Eli lay down beside him and took him in her arms. He wrapped his own around her,

“Oskar, don’t you dare do anything so stupid again! I thought you were dead!”

“He would have killed you, Eli. I couldn’t have that,” he said, softly.

“What were you thinking? It was a car, not a moose!”

“Wow! You girls look exactly alike!” It was hardly out of his mouth before Ryan realized how dumb it must have sounded to them.

“By golly, you’re right! We hadn’t even noticed, had we Oskar?” Jason said, dryly. He grinned at him. “Just kidding! I’d tell you why they look alike but it’s a very long story.”

“We’re identical twins, but we were born 250 years apart.” Eli’s eyes sparkled.

“Yeah, Sure!” but Ryan wasn’t sure of anything right now. A flying boy, a bloody girl with a nasty gunshot wound on her neck, seemingly healthy, with an identical twin 250 years younger than herself, a mysterious man in a dark car with a rifle who was trying to kill them; it was all overwhelming to him. And he had only been in Barnet a week – the first half of a two-week vacation he had thought was going to be relatively boring. As strange and dark as this all was, it was actually exciting to him. “Do you think he’ll come back?”

“Not after you rode up,” Jason glanced toward the road. “Once Oskar destroyed his windshield, you arrived, and Hannah headed for the visitors’ center, he took off.”

§

“I knew it!” Elaine, already agitated even before the phone call, slipped quickly into her suit and launched herself into the air over the pool. “I’ll meet you there, Rich.”

“Elaine, you can’t!! Someone will see you!” But she was already out of sight over the trees. Rich grabbed his bag and some blankets, jumped into the family estate car and backed out into the street. *It’s Marcus! It’s got to be Marcus! But why?!*

He was already at Buttonhole Lane when he finally got off the phone with Jonathan. He had been so stoic, so ...seemingly unaffected by it all that he was worried. As kind-hearted as he was, Jonathan was always quick to anger whenever he felt that Eli was in danger. But this time...

§

“Do you live around here?” Jason asked. He tried to help Oskar to his feet, but Eli held him down.

“You’re not going anywhere until Papa gets here, Oskar.”

“I actually live in Sunderland. I’m just visiting my grandparents for a couple of weeks. This is my grandfather’s Moped.”

“Ryan, we’d really appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone about this,” Eli said, timidly.

Ryan realized he hadn’t even given it a thought. “Who’d believe me, Eli?” he smiled at her. “I...I promise. I won’t tell anyone. But aren’t you afraid he’ll come back later?”

“No, I...”

“Mom’s coming, Eli! She’s almost here!” Oskar turned toward the far side of the field, just as Elaine cleared the treeline and swooped down across the field towards them in a low glide, wings outstretched.

Ryan’s legs gave out on him and he sat down hard on the ground in a feeble attempt to hang on to his dignity. “My God! There’s a whole flock of you!” He turned red as everyone began laughing all at once. “I...I’m sorry! I didn’t mean...” he was totally flustered. *How could I have said something so totally stupid?!*

Oskar reached over and took his hand firmly. “You’re funny! We’ve never been called a flock before.” He squeezed his hand tighter. *Thank you again for stopping.*

Ryan gasped. *You can hear my thoughts? How can you do that?!* He could feel his heart thumping in his chest. He decided he’d better stay right where he was for now. Amazing things were happening way too fast for him to process.

It’s a gift. Oskar grinned at him.

Elaine landed smoothly in front of them, retracted her wings, smiled at Eli, and knelt next to Oskar. “How are you feeling, Oskar? Dad’s got some Ejuice in the car for you both and will be here shortly.”

“I know, Mom. He’s at the gate now.” He turned toward the berm as the Sandstrøm car pulled off the road and sped across the meadow towards them.

Elaine turned her gaze to Ryan, and studied him carefully. She knew Oskar had already touched him and had verified his trustworthiness. “Oskar tells me you came to their aid, despite the possible danger to yourself. I don’t forget such things. They tell me all I need to know about your character.”

“I...I really didn’t think about it. I just saw that they were in trouble and came over. Perhaps if I’d given it more thought, I’d have turned around and run.” He really didn’t know what else to say. He hadn’t thought about the danger, so did that mean he had been brave? Or just stupid?

“Ah! And modest too! An endearing combination of positive character traits.” She smiled at him.

“Mama doesn’t always talk like that, Ryan. Only when she’s frightened.” Eli stood up and put her arms around her.

I was so frightened, Butterfly! We’re strong but no longer as strong as we were. A bullet in the brain might have...

I’m fine, Mama! But she couldn’t hide from Mama the terror she had felt when she almost choked to death on her own blood.

Elaine tightened her grip on her. *I knew it! I could feel it! Even from home!*

Nils and Livia, after making sure everyone was in one piece, began gathering up all their belongings and loading them into the car. Dr. Dawson’s car was heading across the field now, a bit slower since Oskar had filled him in and he knew the danger was over. But still, he rushed over with his bag, examined them both carefully, and cleaned up Eli as best he could. Finally satisfied, he knelt down next to Oskar.

“Dad, she almost died! And I couldn’t do anything for her.”

He helped Oskar up and put his hands firmly on his shoulders. “For a serial hero, you sure have a low opinion of yourself,” he kidded.

“I want to be with Eli, Dad. Can I sit with Eli?”

“Of course, Oskar! Don’t you always?” *What an odd request.*

“Oskar shared everything with me, Butterfly. Thank God you’re all safe!” Elaine walked Eli to the car and helped her in.

With Nils and Livia, they put the bicycles and backpacks in the cars, then Papa lifted Oskar gently and placed him on the seat beside her. He kissed her on the forehead. “Here’s your hero, Eli. Take care of him.”

“I will, Papa.” She smiled at Ryan.

Ryan stood and watched as the two families calmly went about the business of cleaning up after this terrible incident. He couldn’t shake the feeling that they had done it all before; perhaps many times. He wondered what other price they had had to pay for these wonderful, magical abilities they all seemed to have.

“Ryan? I’d like your phone number and address if you’re willing to give it to us.” Dr. Dawson handed him his card. “This has my work and our home phone number on it. If you have any questions, or need help understanding any of this, just give us a call.” He put his hands on his shoulders. “Any time, Ryan. I mean it.”

Ryan hastily scribbled his phone number and address on a scrap of paper and handed it to him. “Can you all fly? How many of you are there? Are you all as nice as Hannah, Eli, Jason and Oskar?”

Dr. Dawson smiled at him. “You’ve met almost all of us. And we’re all in your debt. And it’s what you didn’t ask that tells me all I need to know about you.” He winked at him. “We won’t call you first; I promise. If, after a few days of thinking things through, you still feel you’d like to contact us, then your call will be welcomed.” He got into the car. “Don’t lose that card, Ryan. Unless you want to.”

Ryan said his goodbyes to the Sandstrøms, hopped on his Moped and slowly made his way across the meadow and over the berm, deep in thought. Dr. Dawson waited a few minutes, then started the car and drove slowly across the meadow after him.

Eli gently kissed Oskar, then waved to Hannah and Jason as they drove away.

“They really love each other, don’t they?” Jason put his arm around Hannah.

“They really, really do, Jason.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks for saving my life again Jason.”

“You’re welcome, Hannah Bananah.”

She smiled. He hadn’t called her that since she was ten. He had finally stopped when he got tired of having a chronically sore arm. “That’s a freebie, Jason. But next time....”

§

Sava carefully placed the board back over the crawlspace and handed the lockbox to Jonathan. “I told you he held out on us. I could see it in his eyes at the exchange.”

“And this situation has now gotten completely out of hand. I traced the license number of that mysterious Fiat to Marcus, and now?! He’s actually tried to kill them!” his hands were shaking as he leafed through the photographs. “Do what you have to do, Sava. I’m done with him! And do it before he talks further with that wingnut Pastor in his church, or we’re going to be overrun with sanctimonious hypocrites! But if you have to, take out his whole damned flock!” he seethed with suppressed rage.

“I’ll handle it. Just calm down. I understand how you feel; I feel the same, but cooler heads must prevail here.” He took him gently by the arm and led him outside. “You go do what you do best, Jonathan, and leave this part of the job to me. I’ve gotten quite good at it over the years.”

“Thank you, Sava; you’ve been a Godsend since father died. And don’t forget, my old friend; my offer still stands. Anytime you’re ready.”

Sava watched, detached, as Jonathan backed the delivery van out of the driveway. For a brief moment, he felt just a bit sad. *He’s more like his father than I had imagined.* He waited until he was out of sight, then headed down the block to his own car, watching carefully for any indication they had been noticed by the neighbors. He had some careful planning to do. There could be absolutely no loose ends.

§

“Are Hannah and Jason okay, Mama? I didn’t get a chance...”

They’re fine, Butterfly. And grateful. Oskar probably saved their lives. The whole family is coming over tomorrow to...talk things out.” They had all agreed that the kids had been through way too much to just let them fend for themselves. They needed reassurance and perhaps together, they could undo some of the damage that maniac had caused.

“Okay, Mama.” Eli was tired. And depressed. It seemed as though, whenever things were finally going okay for them, something terrible happened. And this time, it could have been a real ‘innocent’—Hannah herself—who died. She couldn’t help thinking that it was all some sort of cosmic retribution for the terrible things she had done to stay alive all those years. Innocence was clearly in the eye of the beholder. And sometimes, she didn’t feel innocent at all.

Oskar put his head in her lap, and snuggled up against her. The rest of the trip home was quiet.

Nothing much was said at dinner. Neither of them was very hungry. And they both refused to leave one another’s side, even for a moment. Finally, they excused themselves and quietly went up the stairs together, hand in hand.

“I think there’s been some real damage done this time, Rich. They’re not bouncing back the way they normally do. But there’s really nothing remotely normal about them is there?”

“No, Elaine. There really isn’t. We’re writing the book as we go along. Physically, they’re almost adults now; and mentally? In some ways, Eli, at least, has passed us up. One moment, she’s a 14-year-old child; the next she’s an ancient seer. I’m not sure what we can do to help her now; and she’s still got most of the journey ahead of her. And it might be a dark one.”

Elaine stood up and headed for the stairs. “I think I’m going to check up on them before we go to bed. Are you going to be up soon?”

“In a bit. I think I’ll listen to a bit of music first, then check on them myself.” He turned on the stereo in the living room and perused his CD collection. He looked over at the record collection, and smiled as he remembered when he had first seen some of these albums; the night they had met Elaine in the vault for the first time. He pulled out Elaine’s Toscanini collection, turned on

the turntable and put on Beethoven's ninth symphony. He cranked up the volume and settled back in his easy chair, eyes closed.

Elaine knocked softly on the bathroom door. "Are you two okay in there?" She could hear the shower running.

"We're fine Mama. I think we're going to go to bed now, okay?"

"Of course, Eli." She hesitated for a moment, then turned and headed downstairs. As she disappeared around the corner, the bathroom door opened slowly, and they stepped out into the hallway, still holding hands.

Eli suddenly took Oskar's other hand and pulled him up against her. "I...I thought you were dead, Oskar. And my life was over." She rested her head on his shoulder and pressed her cheek against his.

Oskar kissed her neck. "If you had died, Eli..." He choked up, as the faces of all his past tormentors rose up around him. "You're the only reason I'm still alive. After you left, I would have willingly died in the pool. And if you had left me today, I would have died today."

It surprised him how easy it had been for them to forget that part of their past – if 15 years can be considered easy – and how it could all be brought back again with a single clap of thunder. He caressed her bare back gently, remembering all the nights he had spent in her bed, and she in his, in Blackeberg so long ago, talking so easily about anything that came into their minds, and feeling so happy and content; in retrospect, the brief calm before the storm. She felt so familiar to him now, but different at the same time. Her features were more pronounced now, as though a sculptor had been slowly and deliberately refining his work and making her even more perfect than she had been when he met her. All the rounded, soft corners of her 200-year-old child were disappearing and being replaced by the more delicate, nuanced ones of – who she was becoming.

Eli read him, then kissed him on the lips. "Sort of like the way Mama changed her Rose sculpture, and the figures at the top, huh?" She smiled at him and put her arms around his neck. "You've changed too, Oskar. You're quite handsome now. And you're getting taller than me. You were a shrimp when we met. Like me."

"You take that back! You were never a shrimp! Only me. You've always been beautiful and now, you're more beautiful still." His heart ached for her, in spite of the fact that he was already holding her tightly in his arms. He shuddered as he thought about the darkness in the world that only Eli seemed able to hold at bay.

Whenever... it happens, we'll be together, Oskar. I promise. If you should die, stay nearby, and I'll be there with you in the blink of an eye.

I promise you the same, Eli. We'll wait for each other. They both felt the strength of their solemn pact; a pact they both realized had almost been honored that very day.

“You weren’t trying to just stop him, were you Oskar? You were willing to die. Because you thought I was dead.”

Oskar nodded, solemnly.

She got a twinkle in her eye. “Oskar, just make sure I’m really dead next time. Don’t make the same mistake Romeo made.”

He kissed her again. “Okay, Juliette. I promise.” He reached up and touched her face, then closed his eyes and with both hands, gently felt every contour of it, touching her lips, her eyes, and finally her slender neck. *She so perfect, and so beautiful!* His fingers found the faint remnants of her gunshot wound, and his eyes opened. He put his hand over it protectively, trying to will it away.

“It’ll be gone by tomorrow morning Oskar.” she said gently. She put her hand over his and they walked into her room together.

Eli lay down on the bed, pulled Oskar down next to her and pressed his hands to her chest. The powerful 4th movement of Beethoven’s ninth symphony came floating up from the living room. *Dear Papa! He always knows the right thing to say.*

“I heard this for the first time with...Ernst, Oskar. Over a hundred years ago.”

“How can you stand listening to it then, Eli?” He put his arm around her. She took his hand and squeezed it tight.

“Because I saw your beautiful face for the very first time in this music, Oskar. You called me ‘Eli.’” She reached up and gently touched his cheek. “And you called me ‘Elias.’” She pressed her cheek against his chest. “And you knew what I was, yet still loved me.” She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him gently. He kissed her back more firmly, felt her warmth and her closeness, and felt her rapid heartbeat against his chest. She pulled him tight up against her, wrapped her legs around him, and finally, for the first time ever, they made love to each other -- completely, without reservation, and without boundaries...

The moon shone softly through her Eliglass window, illuminating her bed and the beautiful ebony Rose sculpture Elaine had given her so many years ago. And at long last, it became clear to anyone paying attention that the figures at the top of the sculpture were the personification of these sweet, young children-who-were-no-longer-children, whose entire world shone in each other’s eyes; both of them bathed in the same beautiful moonlight and no longer looking at the rose...but only at each other.

§

Marcus opened the front door, then cursed himself for not having used the peephole first.

“What are you doing here? Our business is finished.”

“Remember our bargain, Marcus? You were to give me everything.”

“And I did. I’m a man of my word.”

“What about the copies under your closet floor?”

Marcus broke out in a cold sweat. *How could he possibly know...?*

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Sava stepped in past him and shut the door. “Not really.”

“I kept them for insurance! Why should I trust you? That’s a lot of money. I was afraid you’d come after me if I gave you everything. I wouldn’t have used them unless you had threatened me.”

Sava sighed, “Then why have you set up an appointment with your Pastor and the church executive committee for tomorrow evening?”

“They’re going to help me with...family problems. I swear!”

Sava’s expression didn’t change. “I don’t believe you.”

“Look. I’ll give them to you and that’ll be the end of it. No harm, no foul.” He headed for the bedroom.

Sava stood by the door as Marcus moved the boxes out of the closet, uncovering the loose boards. Marcus knew his rifle was just to his right, against the inside closet wall. “Once you have these, will you finally just leave me alone? I’m no threat to you once you have them. Who’d believe me?”

“Under certain conditions, I might actually have understood the predicament you seem to find yourself in. But since you tried to kill the children, you’ve greatly reduced my natural inclination to sympathize with you.”

Marcus froze. “What do you mean? I didn’t...”

“Save it. Your new car is in the shop as we speak, getting a new windshield and luggage rack. Nice vehicle, by the way. I think your estranged wife will enjoy it. It’s a perfect choice for her and the children.”

“Do you know something I don’t?” *Is he threatening me?*

“I’m absolutely certain of it!” Sava said, sarcastically.

“She won’t get her hands on the car unless she comes home.”

“That’s not going to happen, Marcus.”

So that’s it then. He plans to kill me. He grabbed the rifle, spun around and leveled it at his chest. “Now then. I want you to very carefully take out your gun and put it on the bed.”

“I don’t have a weapon. I’m unarmed.”

“I don’t believe you. Open your jacket.”

Sava slowly removed his jacket, folded it neatly and placed it on the bed. He held his arms out and did a 360. “I told you, I’m unarmed.”

“Then how did you expect to kill me?”

“Actually, I hadn’t made the decision to kill you yet. I was hoping you’d help me with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a religious man. You, of all people, should understand the concept of the ‘wages of sin.’ An eye for an eye?”

Marcus was getting nervous. Why wasn’t this guy scared? Probably because there were many others where he came from. All that money had to come from somewhere, and he realized that if he killed him, there could be repercussions. “What can I do to make this good? Look, I’ve got the upper hand here, and I’m still willing to give you the remaining photos, and let you go.”

“I’m sorry, Marcus. It’s no longer that simple. This is about something bigger than you, if you’re capable of grasping that concept at all.”

“I don’t think you’re in any position right now to be making threats. I could kill you, call the police and tell them I shot you in self-defense after you broke into my house.”

Sava nodded thoughtfully, “Yes. I suppose that might work for you, if you had it in you. And it would certainly make my job easier.”

“What do you mean by that? That doesn’t make any sense at all. You think I don’t have the balls?” Marcus was angry now.

“I wouldn’t know. *Do* you?”

In one smooth motion, Marcus raised the rifle, fired, and saw the black hole suddenly appear in Sava's forehead and the blood spatter against the wall behind him. He spun around and dropped to the floor in a motionless heap. *Take that, you arrogant son of a bitch.*

Marcus threw his rifle on the bed, scrambled to his feet, quickly moved the boxes back into the closet and picked up the phone. Pastor Rawlings would know how to handle this; he'd handled problems like this before...

Chapter 24: Contact

Eli yawned, stretched, and slowly opened her eyes. Still half asleep, she groped for Oskar, but he wasn't there. She rolled over, then smiled to herself when she saw him sitting on the window seat, elbows on his knees and chin in his hands, staring down into the back yard.

"You look like 'The Thinker' Oskar. But cuter." She slipped out of bed quietly and sat in his lap, facing him. "What are you thinking about?"

"What do you think I'm thinking about?" he grinned at her.

"What do YOU think I think you are thinking about?" her eyes sparkled. She laid her head on his shoulder and thought about how very much she loved him.

He rubbed her back gently. "I think you're thinking that I'm thinking about last night."

"You're right." She kissed him on the neck.

"And you're right, too." *Her hair is so beautiful!* He hesitated, then took her face in his hands. "Did you...like it, Eli? Was it nice?" His voice was almost a whisper.

He's so, so sweet! And he smells so good! "It was very nice, Oskar."

"I thought so too." He smiled sheepishly. *Her eyes are so blue!*

"It was...very, very nice." *He's got such a beautiful smile.*

He grinned mischievously. "Wanna do it again?"

"Okay!" She closed her eyes and thought back to that very first night, when she was so terribly lonely and he had asked her to be his girlfriend. And, finally, she had said 'yes.' But back then, it had been because Oskar had promised her that nothing would change. This time, change was the promise. She smiled at him.

And love, impossibly sweet love washed over him; the love of a 250 year old pixie, who had seen unimaginably terrible things, yet still had room for him in her beautiful heart.

He picked her up gently and carried her to the bed.

§

Marcus had already punched in the number before he realized there was no dial tone. *He cut my phone line!* He headed for the dresser to grab his cell phone, when he heard a rustling sound behind him.

"Thank you, Marcus. You've made my decision for me."

He spun around in horror. Sava wiped the blood off his forehead with the back of his hand and deftly snatched the rifle off the bed. The black hole above his right eye shrank away and disappeared before his eyes.

Marcus opened his mouth, but nothing came out but a hoarse squeak.

Sava smiled at him, took the rifle barrel in his hands and slowly bent it until it pointed back over the stock, then let it fall to the floor.

“Why did you try to kill the children?” he asked coldly. “You followed them from the house, you eavesdropped on them, you heard their innocent banter, the harmless, happy conversations of sweet, young children, yet you still took it upon yourself to kill them. Why?”

“I only shot one! And she was still alive when I left. And the boy came at me. I tried to avoid him.” His head was swimming. How could this man still be alive? It was impossible.

“You think you should be rewarded for being incompetent, then?”

Marcus lunged for the door and was caught by the arm, mid-stride, in a grip of iron just above the left elbow. He could feel Sava’s fingers digging into his flesh.

He spun around defiantly. “I think I should be rewarded for trying to rid the world of this evil you’ve created on your island. You think you’re Gods, but there’s only one of those and you’ve blasphemed Him by what you’ve done!”

“I would think that any God worth his salt wouldn’t need the likes of you to look after his interests. I don’t see your wings! Under whose authority have you been conscripted into His holy army?” Marcus felt the palpable rage in his voice.

“Who are you? What are you?”

Sava slowly and methodically unbuttoned his shirt, took it off, folded it neatly and placed it on the bed next to his jacket. He unbuckled his pants, slipped them off and laid them next to his shirt. He raised his muscular arms over his head slowly, an action accompanied by the soft, cellophane crackle of his growing wings. “I’m your worst nightmare,” he whispered, golden eyes blazing.

“God help me! You’re Satan himself!” Marcus shrank back against the wall.

“Don’t flatter yourself! If such an unlikely creature even existed, I can’t imagine him taking the time to give someone like you a second thought. No, I’m a creature whose very existence proves unequivocally that your kind, benevolent god either doesn’t exist, or has a very dark sense of humor.”

Marcus lunged for him again, hoping to knock him off balance, but it was like running into a brick wall. Sava grabbed him around the neck with one hand, bared his fangs, and pulled him close. “Why don’t you join me for dinner, Marcus?” He tilted his head back and roared with laughter. “You know, I’ve always wanted to say that.”

Marcus felt the fiery pain as Sava’s fangs sank deep into his throat. He thrashed about wildly to no avail, and realized that he could no longer breathe. And as he drifted in and out of consciousness, all he could hear was Sava’s soft voice, humming a familiar hymn; a hymn he had sung himself in church hundreds of times; “Nearer my God, to Thee...”

As he faded away into that final darkness, he heard, once again, the soft crackle of cellophane.

§

Hannah and Jason stood quietly behind their parents. The door opened quickly, and Dr. Dawson winked at the both of them. “Good morning, kids. How many times do I have to tell you...”

“I know, Dr. Dawson. We should just come on in; but Mom didn’t think it was okay this early,” Hannah said, accusingly. “See, Mom?”

“Better safe than sorry, Hannah. Good morning Richard. How is everyone today?”

“Elaine and I are just fine, thanks. The kids are still upstairs. They haven’t graced us with their presence yet this morning. Why don’t you go get them up, Hannah? Tell them breakfast is ready.”

“Okay, Dr. Dawson!” she rushed past them and bounded up the stairs.

The three remaining Sandstrøms followed Dr. Dawson into the dining room where Elaine was in the process of setting the table. “Good morning, everyone. Why don’t you come on into the kitchen and have a seat until the kids are down?”

§

Hannah took the stairs two at a time, then flung Eli’s door open. “Caught you!”

Eli and Oskar were sitting at her table, with Elaine’s Rose sculpture between them. “Hi Hannah!” Oskar smiled at her. “I heard you coming a mile away. And besides, Dad told me you were here.”

“Phooey! And I thought I was going to catch you asleep!” She sat down between them at the table and reached for their hands. She got Eli’s, but Oskar pulled back. “Oskar? Is something wrong? Are you two okay? Mom told me that you were really upset last night.”

In truth, she had been upset herself, but in the flurry of activity, and the odd way Oskar and Eli clung to each other in the meadow after what happened...happened, and her fear that the man

might come back, and then Eli's mama suddenly swooping down out of the sky -- the horror of it all didn't sink in until she was alone in bed with the lights out. It was then that she knew she needed them the most. She desperately needed Oskar to make it all go away like he had done before with Den Sjötte. Finally she had gone into Jason's room and climbed into bed with him, her sweet brother, and they had held each other until finally, they slipped into an uneasy sleep.

"You saved us, Oskar! What are you upset about?" She reached over quickly and grabbed his hand tightly. "No secrets, Oskar. Remember? We're..." Her mouth opened. She looked at Eli, then blushed and dropped Oskar's hand like a hot potato. "I...I'm sorry Oskar. I'm sorry Eli! I didn't mean to..."

Eli smiled at her, "It's okay, Hannah. We were going to tell you anyway. Kindred Spirits, remember?"

"I'm sorry anyway, Eli! How could I be so stupid?!"

"It's okay really, Hannah. I didn't mean to embarrass you." Oskar took her hand again.

"You didn't, Oskar. I embarrassed myself." She grinned from ear to ear. "I guess we're even then, huh?"

"No, Hannah. We'll never be even," Eli said softly. "He could have just as easily have shot you. And you'd be dead! I can't even bear to think about it! Or Jason! And it all would have been my fault! He was after me! And Oskar! Because he saw us at the cave, and thought we were...I don't know what he thought we were! And you would have been dead!"

Suddenly, she felt as though Mama's beautiful wings were wrapped around her. *I'm going to fix this, Butterfly. Hannah and Jason will have your wings and your strength soon if I have to do it myself! Livia has to understand how important their safety is now. If this doesn't do it, I don't know what will. This man is just the beginning of what we'll have to face once the public becomes aware of our existence.*

Thank you, Mama! Can Hannah...

Of course, Eli. I'll fix it with Livia and Nils right away.

"Hannah, you're going to spend the night with us."

"I know, Eli. I heard." The thought of being with them again, especially now, made her feel warm all over. And this new revelation made her feel happy for them, yet sad at the same time. They were different now; almost grown up. And different in a way she knew she could never be. She simply wasn't old enough, and there was nothing at all she could do about it. And because of Eli and who she was, she herself was no longer who she had been; consequently, the many friends she had before she met her, bored her now. They talked about silly things in silly ways. They knew nothing about the real world. All they cared about was who wore what to school and who was going with who and what dumb film was showing this week. She felt like she was

caught in some sort of Limbo, half-child and half-adult, and the only ones who could begin to understand her now were Eli and Oskar.

“Hannah? Jack just arrived from the island. He came as soon as he heard what happened. He says to say ‘Hi.’” Oskar grinned at her.

“Jack’s here? We’d better go on down, Eli. Everyone’s hungry, and after all, your mom sent me up to get you.”

“Okay, Hannah! Go ahead. We’ll be right behind you.”

Hannah scurried out the door, while Eli slipped her shoes on. She grinned at Oskar, then blushed.

He took her hand and they headed down the stairs together.

“Hi Jack!” Hannah slipped into the chair next to him. Dr. Dawson put her fairy cup in front of her and filled it with tea.

“How are you doing, Hannah? I was so worried about you all, especially after Jonathan told me who had done this. Thank God you weren’t hurt!”

“I wasn’t Jack, but Eli was...” her voice broke, “And poor Oskar!” she burst into tears, despite all her efforts to stop herself.

Jack put his arms around her and kissed her on the cheek. “It must have been terrible for you to watch it all unfold before your eyes, knowing there was nothing you could do to stop it.”

He understands! “I thought they were both dead, Jack! And I couldn’t do anything but run away for help. I was totally useless.” She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

“Hannah, you kids shouldn’t have to be constantly prepared for murderers and religious nuts whenever you take a bike ride.” He felt funny calling her a kid after all she had been through. He needed to rectify that right now. “But you and Jason aren’t kids any more, Hannah. You’ve both been through more than most adults. And I’m proud of you both!”

“But we do have to be prepared, Jack. It’s just the way it is! And I’m just not old enough! And by the time I am, it could be too late!”

“Livia...” Elaine started, but Nils held his hand up to stop her.

“We know, Elaine. Livia and I talked about this most of the night. I don’t think anyone slept much in the Sandstrøm home last night.” Nils explained. “Livia and I have both agreed. We’re going to get the shots. We need to be able to protect our children.”

“But...Hannah? Jason?” Jack interjected. He squeezed Hannah’s hand tightly.

“No, Jack. Not until they’re 18, or artificial blood is developed. I’m firm on that. But Nils and I are both ready. As soon as we can get it done.”

“Right away then, Livia. I’ll call Jonathan today.” He looked at Hannah sympathetically.

“I’m sorry, Elaine. I know you’ve wanted the children to have this all along, but have kept quiet, so I would feel like at least you were on my side. But I knew.” She smiled at her.

“You’re right, Livia. Are you sure I can’t change your mind? This is no longer a decision that should involve the queasiness factor; they’re in grave danger from others just like him. And there are plenty more where he came from.” She tried her best to be calm, but she couldn’t understand Livia’s position at all at this point.

“And they could have died almost as easily if they had been changed, Elaine. I think for now it’s best that Nils and I take all possible steps to keep them safe. No more trips alone. Anywhere!”

“But Mom! I’m almost 17!” Jason protested. “You mean we can’t even go to the movies alone anymore? To the mall? To my games at school?”

Hannah talked over him, “How embarrassing! Mom, I’m 14! No one’s parents follow them around at 14!”

“Enough!! That’s the way it’s going to be, until we can figure something else out. And Nils, I’m expecting your full support on this!” she look at him accusingly.

“Livia, if someone wants to get to them, they’ll do it. You can’t second-guess them all. And unless you force them to wear body armor, your presence will mean nothing.” Elaine knew she was being excessively blunt, but Livia just had to understand...

“Stop it!” Livia was in tears. “I just wanted my children to be able to grow up without all this violence in their lives! And without having to drink human blood to survive it! Sometimes I just wish we had never met you all!” she stood up abruptly, hesitated a second, then rushed out of the room. They heard the front door slam behind her.

“I’m so sorry, Nils! I didn’t mean...” Elaine felt sick.

“It’s okay, Elaine. Livia isn’t used to things being this far out of control for so long. I’ll talk to her.” Nils got up hastily and disappeared out the door after her.

“Why don’t you kids go on upstairs? Your mom, Jack, and I have some things we need to discuss,” Papa said. “Eli?”

No one moved.

“Jack said we’re not kids any more, Mr. Dawson. And I think he’s right. We’d like to stay, if you don’t mind,” Hannah said, solemnly. Jack winked at her.

She sounds so grown-up, Richard thought to himself. But she's right. They've all earned the right to participate in almost any discussion we might have about their welfare.

"Thank you, Papa!" Eli smiled at him. "Papa says we can stay, Hannah."

"Nils and Livia are rightly concerned about your welfare," he began. "The more the general public knows about our situation, the worse it could be."

"I think you're wrong, Dr. Dawson," Hannah said earnestly, "Only crazy people, and maybe some old people who are set in their ways will want to hurt us."

"What makes you think so Hannah?" Elaine shot a glance at Richard.

"Ryan. Ryan makes me think so, Mrs. Dawson." Look at the difference. Mr. Toulson saw Eli and Oskar at the cave, and for some crazy reason, decided they should be killed. Ryan is about Jason's age. And what was his first reaction to seeing Oskar's wings when he smashed into Mr. Toulson's car? He wanted to help him, because the first thing he saw was someone in trouble. And even after he met us all, he thought we were really interesting. He could have run away, but not only didn't he do that, he promised he wouldn't tell anyone. And Oskar knew he was telling the truth. And he was just there by accident. We didn't pick him."

"And I know all my friends at school would feel the same way, Dr. Dawson," Jason said. Maybe we're just kids, but our minds haven't been filled with the kind of stupid hateful stuff that a lot of adults think. No offense, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson."

"None taken, Jason." Dr. Dawson smiled at him. "And I think you may have something there." He knew Jason was grossly oversimplifying the differences, but there was a grain of truth in his point of view.

"Remember, though, Hannah. No one told Ryan that Eli and I were vampires. How do you think he'd feel about that?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Dawson. Why don't we ask him? If he calls, I mean. I don't think it would make any difference."

They heard the front door open and close. Nils and Livia stepped quietly into the dining room. "I'm truly sorry for what I said, Elaine. I hope you know I didn't mean it. It's just that..."

"We understand completely, Livia. Why don't you two sit down? The seven of us are having yet another interesting discussion about our future and what the rest of the world might think of us." Elaine filled them in on the conversation.

"I think Ryan would behave just like everyone else, Richard. He would be frightened of us, once he learned the truth. His youth doesn't grant him any wisdom that suddenly becomes

unavailable to us when we are adults.” She paused, “And we all are keenly aware of what adults will think of us.”

“I think you’re doing humanity a disservice by equating Marcus with the majority of adults, Livia. He’s just one point on the curve.” Richard argued.

“But there are many points on the curve in the same area, Richard. Marcus isn’t an anomaly.”

“No, Livia, but he is a rarity.”

“Ryan isn’t a rarity, Mom. Most of Jason’s and my friends at school are just like him.” Hannah insisted.

“Well, I’m not willing to wait until the entire generation of Jason’s ‘adults’ dies off to be able to breathe easier. It just takes one of them succeeding to...” she choked up. Nils put his arm around her. “And this ‘Ryan’ hasn’t called you yet has he? I’ll bet that after sleeping on it, he’s decided not to have anything to do with us.”

“It’s only 9:30 in the morning, Livia. Give the poor boy a chance to get out of bed and have breakfast. And, who knows? He might wait a few days before he calls. We know very little about him. Or, he may never call at all, for reasons unrelated to fear.” Elaine paused, “But if he’s anything like our own children, his curiosity will almost certainly get the better of him.” *And then we’ll have to figure out how to deal with the additional problems that may cause.*

“That’s not even the point. Even if children, left to their own devices, are more likely to be understanding and more receptive to the idea of what Eli and Elaine were, they all have parents, many of whom are right alongside Marcus on Richard’s ‘curve.’ Their reactions are going to, to a lesser degree perhaps, mirror those of their parents.”

“But we can think for ourselves, Mom!” Hannah protested.

“Hannah, it’s only because your parents brought you up to do so,” Elaine explained. “Many children grow up in dysfunctional families, or families with dogmatic or narrow-minded points of view. They can’t help but adapt some of these ideas as their own.”

“Well, I’m certain that he’s going to call. He wasn’t like that.”

“It doesn’t matter if he calls or not, Hannah. My mind is made up. I don’t need something else to worry about with regard to your safety and well-being. We have no idea what the long-term effects of this shot will be. Especially on your minds. This ‘weak’ neural network affects your brain and I don’t...”

The phone in the kitchen began ringing loudly. Eli and Hannah grinned at each other. Oskar pushed his chair back.

“I’ll get it, Oskar.” Richard stepped into the kitchen and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Richard? There’s been an accident.” Jonathan sounded distant; detached. “Marcus’s house burned to the ground last night. He was killed in the fire.”

Richard felt a sudden chill. It was too coincidental, and too fortuitous. *This can’t have been a simple accident.* “Jonathan? Tell me you didn’t have anything to do with this.”

The silence on the other end of the line told him everything he needed to know. “How could you do this?! We talked about it...” he stepped into the hallway and walked slowly down the hall towards Elaine’s studio. He definitely did not want the others to hear any of this.

“I did nothing, Richard. I didn’t find out about it until this morning.”

“But your contact? The fellow from Genterapi?”

“Richard, no matter what’s happened, can’t you see that it’s a good thing? If we had gone to the police, there would have been a lot of publicity. Eli and Oskar might have been exposed. Everything we’ve worked for might have been compromised. It’s way too soon for the secret to get out. And he tried to kill Eli!” his voice was shaking. “And he might have tried it again, left to his own devices. And he was going to involve his church in this. Something had to be done!”

“Who was it, Jonathan? If you didn’t do it yourself, who did? Are you telling me that Genterapi employs a murderer-for-hire? That’s completely unacceptable!”

“No, Richard. He’s not an employee. He’s an old friend. A very old friend; a friend of my father’s. And ultimately, one over whom I have very little real control.”

Something clicked in his mind. *The chauffeur! Gudmund’s dark compatriot. The man who, for over a hundred years, accompanied him to Eli’s resting place every time she hibernated. The other vampire!*

Chapter 25: The Phone Call

“What’s going on? Oskar? Who’s he talking to?” Eli took his hand.

“Dad doesn’t want us listening, Eli. It’s Jonathan. Something bad has happened.”

“What!? Is it Henry? Is he okay?” Jack stood up abruptly and disappeared around the corner.

Nils put his arm around Livia, but they could all see that she was shaking.

Hannah rushed over to her and threw her arms around her. “Mom are you okay? I’m really sorry, Mom. Jason and I will do whatever you and Dad think is best, and we won’t complain. We promise! Please don’t be upset!”

“I love you both so much,” Livia whispered to her, hoarsely. “I’d simply die if something were to happen to you. I couldn’t bear it. And for over a year now, your lives have been threatened so many times I can’t count them. If this keeps up, it’s only a matter of time before...”

“Nothing will happen to them, Livia. We’ll see to it, I promise you. And if we have to wait until they’re 18 to make the change, then we’ll deal with that. There are many options open to us. We could move to the island until they’re older. In fact that’s probably the best option. They’d be safe there, and would have greater freedom.”

“That’s where Marcus found them, remember?”

“That’s no longer a problem, Livia. Jonathan bought out Maritime Maintenance. Genterapi now handles all the personnel management there. And everyone, without exception, who visits the island from now on will be Archaeogenetics’ employees. It will be completely safe now.” Elaine sat down next to Livia and took her hand. “We’ve all got your back, Livia. Please let us do this for you.”

“Is Henry okay, Jack?” Hannah put her arm around him as he stepped back into the dining room with Richard.

“He’s fine, Hannah. But there’s been a terrible accident. Marcus died in a house fire last night. The preliminary investigation has placed its origins in the kitchen, probably a grease fire or something, and they suspect he probably died of smoke inhalation. They found his remains in what was left of the living room.”

“I can’t say I’m sorry to hear that, Jack,” Nils said softly, “I might have killed him myself if I’d run into him yesterday.” Elaine was surprised to hear the tremor in his voice. Nils had always been a rock.

Hannah and Jason looked at each other. Hannah slipped into Nils’ lap and put her arms around him. “I love you, daddy.”

“You know I love you too, sweetheart.” He whispered.

Livia felt like a huge weight had just been lifted off her chest. The darkness of Den Sjötte and the others, though terrible enough, hadn’t seemed to affect her as much as Marcus’s darkness. After all, they were vampires, at least partially victims of the parasite and its mindless predation. She liked to think that it was a darkness stripping them of their humanity that had driven them to do those terrible things, but Marcus had driven home to her the reality of man’s own darkness; sometimes just as deep, black, and mindless as that of the parasite, but even more terrible because it is a choice consciously made. As old as she and Nils were, they had somehow been able to avoid this truth until now. She felt sad for her children, and especially for Hannah, who still, in spite of everything, lived in her own fairy-tale world. The fall would be terrible for her. “What do we do now, Richard?”

“We hope he hasn’t told anyone else about what he did or who we are. Jonathan is looking into that right now, and will get back to us in a few days.”

“We’ve been talking about a permanent move to the island, Rich. At least until Hannah is 18. I think we’d all be safer there and then Livia and Nils wouldn’t have to get the shot.”

“But they’d have to give up all their friends, their school activities, virtually everything they’ve grown up doing their entire lives. Eli and Oskar are used to it; especially Eli, but Hannah and Jason?”

“We’ll do whatever Mom and Dad want us to do, Dr. Dawson,” Jason said quietly. “We’re a family, and that’s what we should do.”

The phone rang again. This time, no one got up to answer it. Eli looked at Papa, who immediately slipped into the kitchen once again.

“Hello? Jonathan?”

“It’s...Ryan, Dr. Dawson. I just called to find out how Oskar is doing. And Eli.”

“They’re doing just fine, Ryan. But how about you? Elaine and I have been worried about you. The whole thing must have been a profound shock. It’s not every day a person sees something so terrible.” *And you’re so young*, Richard thought to himself.

“I’m fine! But it must have been awful for all of you. I thought Oskar was dead when he hit the windshield.” He hesitated a moment. “Why was that man trying to kill them? You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.” He added quickly.

“Because they’re different, Ryan. And some people can’t tolerate ‘different’ very well.”

“I’m not sure I understand. I know what prejudice is, but to kill someone...”

"I'm not surprised you don't understand. Your actions yesterday showed me why you don't understand. And they've earned you the right to ask any questions you wish." Richard sat back down at the table and winked at Hannah. "You win, Hannah. It's Ryan," he whispered. Hannah flashed a victorious grin at Livia.

"Are...are you all ...human? I mean...you have wings! And you must be strong, or else how could Eli and Oskar have survived? I know it sounds silly, but it's like you're all characters right out of X-Men or something. And do you live a long time? Eli said she was 250 years old. Was she kidding?"

"Slow down, Ryan. I can see this could take some time." Richard looked questioningly at Elaine, who nodded. "How long are you going to be with your Grandparents, Ryan?"

"One week more, Dr. Dawson; then I head for home."

"Why don't you drop by and pay us a visit? Or, better yet, we could come by and pick you up, and introduce ourselves to your Grandparents."

"I...don't think that would be a good idea, sir. They're really nice, but...I really don't want to have to lie to them if they ask how we met. Maybe I could just take the bus. I've already looked up the transfers. And they trust me. I've already made several trips downtown since I've been here."

Richard smiled to himself. "Looks like you've thought this through, Ryan. Would tomorrow around noon be good for you?"

"It would, Dr. Dawson! And thank you so much."

"You're quite welcome, Ryan." He put the phone down. "He's coming tomorrow at noon. Is that okay for all of you?"

Hannah was beaming. "I think it'll be great! What can we tell him, Mr. Dawson? Or maybe I should ask you what we can't tell him?"

"I don't think you should mention anything about your...origins, Eli. It's not that he may not be trustworthy; I just think it's too much to saddle him with on the first visit. I think you should just let things flow naturally, get to know him, and let him get to know you. Remember how long it took Hannah to finally realize you weren't a fairy." He winked at her.

"But she is a fairy, Mr. Dawson. I haven't changed my mind at all. And her Mom is a fairy too. And you! And now, Jack!" *Jack is a fairy!* Hannah especially liked that idea. A lot. She pulled out her notebook and made a note to look up what the name was for a boy who's a fairy.

Jack laughed, "Hannah, you seem to have forgotten whose 3-meter-tall picture is not only in full display on the Archaeogenetics building, but on all their letterhead. And that picture was hand-

drawn by Eli's oldest benefactor, one whom I would ultimately trust to know who's a fairy and who isn't. And remember, he could see your future clearly."

Dear Jack! He's just so sweet! She blushed. "I...I hadn't even thought about that."

"Livia, you're fighting a losing battle. Hannah's future has been foretold by an expert."

Livia smiled in spite of herself. "But he didn't say when, Jack. And don't most fairies drink nectar? As soon as Ejuice becomes nectar, Hannah can have her wings."

§

Nils, Livia, and Jason said their goodbyes after dinner. The general consensus was that they would move to the island within the next few months, although Richard was still unconvinced that this was the best solution. Jason would be coming back tomorrow to meet Ryan, but Nils and Livia were going to begin preparations for the move.

"Hannah, I'm really sorry you're going to have to move to the island. I wish there were some other way. Papa's right; you shouldn't have to do this. You and Jason are just ... normal. You're immune to the bite of a vampire, but that's it. If he hadn't confused you with me, your life might not have even been in danger at all. And he's the only one that saw you! You guys aren't in any danger at all anymore." Eli slipped into her fairy pajamas and began brushing her hair.

"It's okay, Eli. I...I don't really belong anywhere any more. Except with you and Oskar. I can't talk to anyone at school about anything important any more. And it's not their fault; it's mine." She sat down on the bed and put her arm around her.

"Here. Let me brush your hair too, Hannah." She slid back on the bed, grabbed Hannah around the waist and pulled her up against her. "Why is your hair so much softer than mine? I've done everything you've told me, but it's still stiff and stringy!"

"It's not, Eli. Really it's not!" She turned and ran her fingers through it. "It's just as nice as mine, I promise. I'm not just saying that."

"You're wrong, Hannah." She grabbed a handful of Hannah's hair and massaged it with her fingers. See? Yours is shinier and silky smooth."

"No it isn't, Eli. Here, feel yours." She grabbed a handful of Eli's hair and shoved it into her other hand. "They're exactly the same! See?"

"What on earth are you two doing?! Girlie stuff?" Oskar plopped down on the window seat.

"What do you mean, 'girlie stuff?'" Hannah said, heatedly. "What's wrong with 'girlie stuff?' For someone who professes to hate 'girlie stuff,' you sure do like to hang around with us 'girls' a lot. Why do you suppose that is, Oskar? Our superior intellect?"

“It’s because you’re both so cute when you’re mad at me.” He grinned at her. “I love your green fairies, Hannah. New pajamas?”

“Nooo, Oskar. I had these on the island. I got them when I got the bathing suits for Eli and me.”

“Well, excuuuse me! I haven’t seen you in your pajamas since before my birthday, remember?”

“Has it really been that long?” But Hannah knew it had. And so much had happened since then, especially last night, that she didn’t even know if it could ever be the same again between them all. And it frightened her. Those nights spent together touch-talking were really important to her, and had been ever since Eli spent the night at her house after she flew her to safety from the tree. And Oskar? Sweet Oskar had surprised her over and over again with his kindness and understanding. And she knew how lucky she had been to find not one, but two soul mates, within the space of a month.

“Hannah? Are you okay?” Oskar read the sadness on her face, slipped onto the bed beside her and grabbed her hand before she could pull it away. And he read her fears; her doubts. *Oh Hannah! You couldn’t be more wrong. We love you more than ever.* He shared his revelations about love with her, realized when they held hands briefly along the rutted road on their bicycles barely two days ago -- *an eternity ago*, she thought to herself -- and he had embarrassed himself before he understood what he had discovered.

“Oskar, how can I even pretend to be angry with you when you say something like that to me?” she smiled at him, then kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Eli and Oskar gently pulled her down onto the bed between them, folded her in their arms, and together they shared their sweetest memories with each other, until, once again, Hannah fell into a deep ,fairy-filled sleep. And in her beautiful dreams, they were flying together over the magical fairy city, Oskar on her left, Eli on her right, and her own magnificent gossamer fairy wings eclipsing their black velvety ones.

§

Eli and Hannah sat on the low fence outside the house, waiting for the bus. Ryan had called just before he left, and Hannah knew the route well enough to know which one he would likely be on. “I had a wonderful dream last night, Eli. I dreamt we were all together flying over the City of the Solar Wind, only I was the Archaeogenetics fairy, the one from the logo. You know, the one with the real fairy wings?”

“You mean, you were the only real fairy in your dream?” Eli grinned at her.

“No, no! You’re the real fairies, Eli. But everything was just so beautiful!”

“I’m glad, Hannah.” They both turned as the bus pulled up to the corner, and both Ryan and Jason stepped out, deep in conversation.

Jason spotted them immediately and waved. “Hi, Sis! Hi Eli. I found Ryan on the bus.”

“Wow! What luck! That bus is just so big he should have been almost impossible to find,” Eli said sarcastically.

Jason shot her a dirty look, and ignored her. “Ryan is into Metal, it turns out.” He said, excitedly.

“What kind of metal?” Eli was puzzled. “Gold? Silver?”

Hannah laughed. “It’s a kind of popular music, Eli. “It’s really loud and obnoxious. To me it’s just a bunch of screaming and yelling. I make Jason close his door whenever he plays it. Even Einstein runs for cover and covers his ears with his paws.”

“He does not! In fact he loves it.” Jason winked at Ryan. “Unlike you, he has good taste.”

“Whatever!!”

“Hi Ryan!” Oskar stepped out on the porch. “I thought I heard the bus. Come on in! Mom and Dad are inside.” They all followed Oskar through the house and onto the back porch. “And this is Jack Shaw. He’s been our friend for years and years, and works with Dad now. They’re both scientists.

“Hello, Ryan,” Elaine handed him a tall glass of iced tea. “Make yourself comfortable.” She gestured toward the couch. Jason and Ryan sat down across from Oskar, Eli, and Hannah.

“Jason told me your mom and dad aren’t coming, Hannah. I really wanted to talk to them too.”

“They’re kind of busy getting things ready for us to...move away.” Hannah hesitated, wondering if it was okay for her to have said anything. She looked at Elaine questioningly.

“It’s okay, Hannah. He should know. But we can’t tell you where just yet, Ryan. But be assured, you can still reach us at that phone number wherever we are.”

“Are you leaving because of what happened?”

“Yes, we are. We thought it best, since neither Jason nor his sister has... these abilities.” Dr. Dawson put his arm around Hannah.

“What!? You mean...if that man had shot Hannah instead of Eli, she’d...” Ryan couldn’t go on. He realized he didn’t really know them well enough for him to feel as strongly as he did, but for some reason, as nice as they had all been to him when they had so much else going on, he had become quite fond of them all, and felt closer to them than he had any real reason to. He couldn’t understand it himself. “But aren’t they twins?” He thought a moment, “but they can’t be can they? Eli is much older.” He scratched his head. “Would you be willing to tell me how that’s possible?”

“I would if we understood why, Ryan, but we don’t. Eli is over 250 years old for specific reasons we can’t tell you right now. Not because we don’t trust you, but out of concern for your...sensibilities. As to why Hannah, who really is just 14 years old, looks exactly like Eli and is an exact DNA match, we simply don’t know.”

“I know.” Hannah interjected, “It’s because we’re sisters who were born 250 years apart. And that’s just the way it is.” She leaned over and kissed Eli on the cheek.

“You can’t be sisters! You get along with each other too well,” Ryan kidded. “My older brother and I fight all the time, at least when he’s around. He’s actually a lot older than I am.”

“Well, we don’t.” Eli said smugly. “Now Oskar and I on the other hand...”

“Yeah, we both fight with Oskar. It’s great fun!” Hannah poked Oskar in the ribs.

“And Oskar isn’t really my brother. He’s my best friend in the world. We’ve known each other for a long, long time. And we’ve saved each other’s life many times, just like he did mine in Hannah’s field when he...almost died.” She looked down at her feet, “And I love him with all my heart,” she whispered. She laid her head on his shoulder.

Ryan tried his best to understand all this, but it was difficult. Each answer brought new questions. *One thing at a time*, he reminded himself. “Why do you have wings? Or at least Oskar and your mom have them. Anyone else?” He looked around the room questioningly.

“Mama, Papa, Oskar, Jack here, and myself. That’s all right now, but soon...” She smiled at Hannah.

Jason shrugged his shoulders. “Mom says we have to wait until we’re 18.”

“What?! You mean you can...do this to yourselves whenever you want to? What do you have to do? Take a bite out of the right side of the cake, like Alice in Wonderland?”

Everyone laughed. “I told you he was funny, Papa. He called us a ‘flock’ in the field.”

“Well, Ryan, you’re almost right,” Dr. Dawson said. “It takes an injection. Oskar, Jack, and I received injections. Eli and Eli’s mother were...infected in a different manner. It was because of them that we were able to discover the secret.”

This is real! It hit him for the first time. This was no tall tale, or a figment of his wishful thinking. These were real people; real scientists, who had done something amazing and had people trying to kill them because of it. “Did that man try to kill you all because he wanted the secret and you wouldn’t give it to him?”

“No, Ryan. He wanted to kill them because he was afraid of the secret. He thought it had dark religious connotations. But I’m sure there are others who would want this secret badly enough

that they might be willing to kill for it.” Elaine sighed. “If only things could be...simpler. But immortality is not something that some people will be able to accept without great difficulty.”

“Immortality!” He realized that this was the only explanation for the age differences. And when they said Jack had been their friend for a long time, they really meant it. He had aged; they hadn’t. “But Eli, you and Oskar; and you Hannah, and Jason? You’re aging now, but didn’t for some time? Did you take a bite out of a different side of the cake?” He grinned at them.

“Good observation, Ryan. And you’re right. The aging process is halted with a different injection.” *I can see this is going to take a while.* Dr. Dawson settled back in his chair, and began.

§

They talked well into the evening. Finally, it was time for them to say their goodbyes. Elaine insisted on driving Jason and Ryan home, since it was almost dark. Especially after talking with Livia on the phone. She absolutely didn’t want Jason coming home unaccompanied on the bus in the dark, and thought Ryan, since he now could be associated with them all, needed similar protection, especially since he would be seen in public with Jason if they took the bus home together.

Jack, Oskar, and Dr. Dawson stood on the front porch as Elaine, with a squeal of tires, rounded the corner past the house and disappeared.

“What do you think, Oskar?” Jack put his hand on his shoulder. “Did we do the right thing?”

“Yeah, I think so. I really like him, and I KNOW Jason does. And he proved Jason’s point. Young people are going to be much more willing to accept new things than most old ones.”

Jack smiled at him, “I’m not sure I agree with you Oskar, but Ryan certainly fits in with Jason’s theory. But of course, you need a lot more data points before you can be that certain of its validity.”

“You sound just like Hannah, Jack. Or I guess it’s more like she sounds just like you.” He grinned at him.

“But we do have to be careful, Oskar,” Papa cautioned. “As much as I would have liked to have told him everything, it would have put too great a burden on him. We don’t know his family, and from this point on, he’ll already have to lie to them if any of this ever comes up. And he’s just 17 years old. He shouldn’t have to lie to his parents, or his grandparents at this age. When he’s 18, if he’s still interested, we’ll revisit this. As the situation worsens, as I’m sure it will, we’ll need all the friends we can get.”

§

Elaine took the long route to Buttonhole lane, and dropped Ryan off two blocks from home, at his insistence. They waited until he was out of sight before turning around and heading for Jason's house.

"He's a real nice guy, Mrs. Dawson. Would it be alright if I stayed in contact with him? Even after he goes home?"

"Of course, Jason. Just remember to keep the conversation away from the more sensitive topics. You and Hannah may be known to others. And under no conditions are you to e-mail or write to each other about anything we've talked about, or anything specific that occurred at the field. And never mention the island or its location, unless you use the code-words we selected this evening." She smiled at him, encouragingly. "This may all be temporary, Jason. Once Jonathan finishes his investigation into how far Marcus went in his 'holy mission,' we might be in no immediate danger of discovery at all. When I get you home, I think we should discuss all this with your parents before I head for home, just to make sure we're on the same page."

As they drove away, deep in conversation, they failed to notice the dark figure who stepped out of the shadows at the end of the block, and quietly followed Ryan into the darkness down the narrow, dimly-lit cobble-stoned road.

§

The kids were already upstairs getting ready for bed, when the doorbell rang. Jack looked at Dr. Dawson. "Elaine just left the Sandstrøm's a minute ago. And why would she ring anyway?" Richard hastily rose and headed for the door. He opened it just as it rang again.

"Good evening, Dr. Dawson. May I come in?" Sava was still buttoning up his jacket. "Such a beautiful evening to fly, don't you think? Crystal clear sky and a full moon. Quite invigorating."

Chapter 26: Sava

Ryan walked slowly up the path to his grandparents' house, deep in thought. He never would have thought that such a dark beginning could have resulted in such a wonderful ending. He now had friends of a completely different variety than he was used to; friends who knew things about him he had never even known about himself until now; that, when the chips were down, he WAS strong enough to do the right thing and come to the aid of someone in danger. And it was a comforting feeling, because he had lived his life to this point, not knowing if he had what it took to do that. And because of it, he felt at peace with himself for possibly the first time in his life.

As he stepped up on the porch and took out his key, he felt a sudden chill, and turned around quickly. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. He saw nothing but the fading taillights of Mrs. Dawson's car, but still couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching him from the darkness. Impulsively, he walked slowly toward the front gate, head cocked, listening intently for any sound that seemed out of place. There was nothing, but he still couldn't shake the feeling. *I've just got an overactive imagination*, he thought to himself, completely understandable after everything that had happened over the last couple of days. He sighed, turned back and went inside. "Grandma, I'm home," he called out. But he made quite sure the door was locked before he headed upstairs.

He slipped into his bedroom without turning on the lights and, stooping low, moved over to the window. The porch light illuminated the front yard and part of the street, although the tall shrubs along the walk cast long shadows, in which he could make out nothing at all, even in the bright moonlight. *Too much contrast*, he thought to himself. Just as he turned away, there was a sudden momentary dimming of the light, as though there had been a power fluctuation. It took him a moment to realize that something had passed in front of the moon, and he glanced up, expecting to see the lights of an overhead plane or a small cloud, but there was nothing. He lay back on his bed, hands behind his head, feeling vaguely uneasy. Normally, such things didn't bother him; he had never been afraid of the dark, but now that he knew winged, nearly-invincible people existed in the real world, the door was suddenly open to all sorts of possibilities, and he had no reason whatsoever to think that they would all be as benign as the Dawsons.

§

Jonathan was nervous. He was exceedingly uncomfortable with the new interest Sava was suddenly expressing in the future of the Dawson family. He was beginning to regret having involved him in the pursuit of Marcus in the first place, even though he had fully agreed with the result and indeed had even encouraged Sava to do exactly as he had done.

But he also knew he had little control over this mysterious dark force, which had known and worked closely with his father for over three of his own lifetimes. He couldn't shake the feeling that the two of them had their own agenda, formed and mapped out long before his father had adopted him because, although he never doubted his father's love for him and dedication to him, he could never quite shake the idea that he was just a small cog in a much larger machine. His father had always been an enigma to him on some level. Although they shared, probably by assimilation, the same goals with respect to Eli, he had always thought his father had an even

more distant and lofty goal than merely Eli's happiness, no matter how important that was for him to salvage his family's honor, and right a great wrong. And at a time when their secret was at a critical stage, and most fragile, Sava was becoming more of an unknown and had begun asserting himself in disturbing ways. He was becoming a loose cannon. Jonathan was determined to come to an understanding with him before it got even more out of hand. Too much was at stake.

§

Oskar stepped into Eli's room at the ready, well-prepared, he thought, for the nightly ritual of the battle of the wills. He grinned at them. "Honestly, you two need to 'expand your horizons,' so to speak. You need to give other mythical creatures equal time on your pajamas. Aren't you getting bored with fairies?"

"Not until YOU walked into the room, Oskar." Hannah said, icily.

"Take my pajamas for example: Nice, sensible cowboys on bucking broncos; REAL creatures in a real world."

Eli snickered. "I never thought you'd have the nerve to wear those, Oskar."

Oskar feigned a look of surprise, "But Eli, my kindred spirit, my blood sister! My soul mate! You picked these out for me yourself!"

Eli and Hannah looked at each other. And in unison, almost as though they had rehearsed it; "Oskar are you besmirching our honor?!" They quietly slipped off either end of the bed and had him surrounded in seconds.

"What shall we do with him, my kindred spirit?" Eli moved up behind him.

"We need to make him pay for his insolence, my blood sister." Hannah stepped up in his face with an evil grin on her own.

It was then that Oskar noticed for the first time that they each had one hand behind their backs. *Uh-Oh!* He barely got the thought out before his head was sandwiched for an instant between two water balloons. He involuntarily gasped at exactly the wrong part of that instant, and inhaled what seemed to him to have been a full liter of water. What was left of his dignity disappeared as he slipped and fell on the wet floor and landed on his butt with a now-soaking-wet smack, hacking and coughing.

Suddenly his eyes got big. "Eli! There's a vampire. In the front yard!"

"Sure there is, Oskar." She took his hand and helped him up. "Nice try though...He's right, Hannah! There is!" Oskar scrambled across the hall to his room, threw on dry clothes, and headed down the stairs, with the girls in their pajamas and robes, right behind him. They all stopped short at the foot of the stairs just as they heard Papa say, "Of course you can come in."

Eli gasped, “Papa! Who is he?!”

Sava looked at Hannah, then at Eli, stony-faced. “Dr. Dawson, I believe you and I have some very important things we need to discuss. Important only because we have a common interest in Eli.” She could feel his piercing eyes examining her intently. And she knew with a certainty that he could tell the difference between them with no effort whatsoever.

“Indeed we do, Sava. We particularly need to discuss your erroneous notion that the end justifies the means.” He turned to Oskar. “Oskar, would you and the girls please go up to your rooms now? And I would greatly appreciate it if you did not listen in on our conversation. I am fully confident that Sava will be completely truthful with us.”

The three of them backed halfway up the stairs to the first landing before they realized how stupid they looked. They turned quickly and scurried past the landing out of sight.

They went silently into Eli’s room, where Eli and Hannah pulled Oskar down between them on the bed. He hardly had time to kick his shoes off before they had pulled the blanket up over them all, slid up against him, and locked their arms together behind his head. They lay there quietly on their backs, staring up at the ceiling, straining to hear any part of the conversation taking place in the living room. But even Eli wasn’t able to pick up much.

§

“Doctor, please enlighten me. If the end doesn’t justify the means, what on earth does? Religious dogmatism? Blind patriotism? Sanctimonious proselytizing? The superego?”

“Don’t play your word games with me, Sava. You’re older even than Eli, and you’ve lived all your extended life as an adult. Don’t waste my time trying to justify the cold-blooded murder of a human being.”

Sava leaned back on the couch, with his hands behind his head. “I’m absolutely certain you haven’t the ability to understand the darkness of my life, Dr. Dawson; a darkness which has given me real insight into the meaning of ‘light.’ You, in your naivety, think you understand what evil is, and have convinced yourself that darkness is merely the absence of light. I’m here to tell you, not convince you, that you’re wrong. Over the years I’ve come to recognize the futility of trying to convince men like you that evil exists as a force. Thus, all we can do is agree to disagree.” He leaned forward until their knees were touching and all Dr. Dawson could see was his golden eyes. “But I’ve seen it firsthand, Doctor. I saw it in the eyes of Gudmund’s father and countless others throughout the centuries I’ve been cursed with this disease. A disease I acquired, ironically, via an innocent, much like Eli, but weaker.” He saw the surprised look on Dawson’s face. “Did you really think that Eli was the first and only one of her kind? Eli is unique, a special jewel, a most perfect one, but not the only one. There have been many others who, without the help of men like you, and men like Gudmund, have perished, alone and unknown in the world, their potential never reached nor realized. The unborn children of men who have died in battle before they were conceived; the children of the poor, who died the silent

death of starvation and never became the great men and women they were capable of becoming. So many have been lost before they were ever found. The ones we are fortunate enough to find have to be protected at any cost. At any cost, Dr. Dawson!” His eyes got a faraway look in them. “For Eli is the product of a Perfect Storm. And Oskar is the catalyst without which even Eli might have faltered, and missed her mark. And Hannah? Hannah is the promise of generations to come.”

Dawson realized the normal rules didn’t apply to Sava. Being closely involved for over a century with a man who could see the future, he had clearly redefined what was meant by ‘the end justifies the means.’ If the end result could be seen clearly, then human fallibility wasn’t an issue for Sava. Even now, when it should be.

“No one has the right to wantonly destroy something they can’t create. As soon as you have the ability to create a human being, and understand fully all the complexities and nuances of his life and his life experiences, then perhaps we can revisit your position.”

“Why Dr. Dawson! I didn’t realize you were a religious man.” The sarcasm in his voice wasn’t lost on Dawson.

“You, of all people, should realize that religion has absolutely nothing to do with my position, Sava. It’s born of the realization that, even to an atheist, there are ideas bigger than oneself and one’s individual survival. Belief in the sanctity of life is not a religious position; it’s a human one. It existed long before organized religion existed in any form. It was born long ago in the unconditional love of a mother for her child, and reciprocated by the love of that child for its mother. It was shaped and finally solidified by millions of years of evolution and burned into our souls by the countless premature, meaningless deaths of our loved ones over the dark centuries during which we slowly rose to the top of the food chain, alone and with no help from the Divine. Religion is merely a means of codifying what man already knows in his heart.”

“Interesting points for future discussion, Doctor, but ultimately, a waste of time for those of us who have already settled into our own comfortable dogmas. What can I do to fix this?”

“Under no circumstances are you to murder anyone else for Eli’s sake. No matter what difficulties arise as a result. And in your case, self-defense obviously isn’t an excuse either.”

“I can’t promise you that. But I will let you know ahead of time when I may be considering such an action. That’ll give you a chance to talk me out of it.” He smiled at him. “You do realize that if Marcus had lived, his entire church would now be involved. And they are a dangerous bunch, as are all religious zealots.”

“If you’re so certain that Hannah is the ‘promise of generations to come,’ then don’t you think the negative effects your involvement in this death will have on her is reason enough to take pause?” Jack was becoming angry at Sava’s arrogance. “She’s not Eli. She’s a sweet, kind, 14-year-old girl who still prefers to believe in fairies. Yet she would give her own life for Eli. She’s proven it already.”

“Then she’s in good company, isn’t she, Jack? Okay, I take your point. But I believe you underestimate her inner strength. In fact...”

“And Eli would give hers for Hannah. Don’t you ever forget it! And because of that fact alone, she could present a danger even to you.” he said, sternly.

“And you’ve only postponed the inevitable, Sava. Your actions have given us possibly a few more years of anonymity; nothing more,” Dawson interjected.

“You don’t have to thank me, Doctor,” Sava said sarcastically, “I did it for Eli, and will continue doing these things for Eli. And what’s more, I will do them with, or without, your approval if I think they are necessary. I’m being frank with you because I have the greatest respect for you – and Elaine. You have made her happy AND secure for the first time in her life, and for that reason alone I am in your debt. And I pay my debts, Doctor. That’s the only reason I’m willing to compromise as much as I have. Gudmund and I were always on the same page with respect to Eli. How else did you suppose two curmudgeonly vampires had gotten along so well together for over a century?”

“But Gudmund was righting a terrible wrong perpetrated by his father. How did you get into the game?”

“I have my reasons, Doctor. Reasons not so much different from Gudmund’s.” He stood up abruptly. “Until next time then, Doctor. Jack.” He bowed to each of them. “If you feel the need to contact me, talk to Jonathan.” He stepped into the hall and opened the front door. “Oh, and tell Elaine not to worry about Den Sjätte. I was the mysterious night flyer stalking the girls that evening. One can’t be too careful you know, especially when all the precious eggs are in one basket, and one of them not yet hatched.” he flashed them a quick smile and sprinted into the darkness toward the stream, just as Elaine rounded the corner and pulled into the driveway.

§

“He’s gone.” Oskar said, to no one in particular. But of course they all knew. But they didn’t know what he knew. He hadn’t been able to help it. He saw Marcus’s death in vivid detail. He hadn’t meant to; he had reached out because he was curious, and it played out in his mind in all its stark, ruthless, vengeful glory. And Oskar was very thankful that this darkness was on their side.

He tucked the memory of it away in a place he had found in his mind where Eli never seemed to look.

After Oskar assured them that all was well, Eli and Hannah snuggled up against him and they went quietly to sleep together, sharing dreams as they had done so many times before, and would continue to do for a much longer time than would have seemed possible – but, after all, these were special children, not old, no longer young, and deeply in love with one another.

§

Sava hovered over the city at the extremities of Oskar's consciousness, skating slowly back and forth around the edges, but never getting quite close enough for Oskar to sense his presence. He had done this often enough to know exactly when the right moment would present itself to him. Finally, Oskar's flickering light winked out, signaling his descent into the first stage of non-REM sleep. Sava smiled to himself as, for a brief moment, like the ethereal flash of green light at sunset, he saw Oskar clearly, lying on his back with Eli's and Hannah's arms intertwined across his gently rising and falling chest. He banked purposefully toward the Dawson home and picked up speed. He sensed Oskar drifting in and out of his light sleep, and took care to keep his thoughts light and emotionless, lest he be startled awake again. He knew Oskar had read him earlier in the evening, and would recognize him instantly if he awoke.

Ten minutes had passed since he first fell asleep. Sava could feel Oskar's heart rate slow, his body temperature begin to decrease slightly, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was safe now. Oskar had slipped into the first of the deep delta sleep stages.

He landed on the sidewalk next to the cobblestoned path by the copse where Hannah's bike had died an honorable death, retracted his wings and hurried up the street toward the Dawson home. He heard high-pitched squeaks, and looked up as several bats passed overhead, paused, circled about in confusion for a moment, then got their bearings and headed toward the clouds of insects that regularly hovered over the still water of the duck pond next to the stream. He moved silently across the street, up the sidewalk in front of the Dawson house, stepped up on the porch and stood at the front door for a moment until he was confident that all in the house were sound asleep, then gently put his key in the lock and eased the door open. He gently closed the door behind him and stood stock still, taking in the smells of dinner, lavender, and roses and listening to the soft breathing of the family, mentally checking them off one by one as he recognized each of them. He softly and fluidly moved up the stairs past the second floor landing and paused briefly on the top step of the third floor landing. Oskar was in the deepest of sleeps. He would not be a problem.

Sava eased the door open and move very slowly across the room to their bed. He reached across Hannah and Oskar, and lightly touched Eli's hand, sensing immediately that she too had fallen deeply asleep. He knew that, with her hearing, she would have already been aware of his presence otherwise. He was quietly thankful that the dark days of hibernation, when the parasite reasserted its dominance over her, were a thing of the past, for her at least. He carefully removed a small leather wallet from his pocket and opened it up on the edge of the bed, next to Hannah's still form. He carefully removed an ancient glass syringe from its loop and laid it gently next to Hannah's arm. Then he moved up, slid his hand gently under her head and even more gently, tilted it back, exposing her slender neck to him. He had seen its duplicate hundreds of times, he knew; every time he and Gudmund together had watched over and protected Eli all those years in hibernation. He tilted her head back just a bit more and gently placed his mouth over her jugular. He could sense the blood coursing through her veins, feel her heartbeat, so near and yet so impossibly far away, and he trembled instinctively, reveling in the feelings generated by the strong urge to bite, to break through the thin layer of delicate flesh separating him from that which he desired the most at this moment, and the power of the primordial force driving him --

and the deep peace he felt, knowing it could never happen because he was, and had been for over a century, the captain of his fate, and the master of his desires. All except one.

He gently grew his fangs, taking care not to press them against her neck, lest she awaken. Instead, he moved his moistened tongue against them and lightly massaged her neck with their numbing excretions and waited patiently for them to take effect. Reluctantly, he retracted his fangs and moved slowly back, uncapped the syringe, and in one fluid movement, plunged it into her jugular and emptied it. She twitched slightly, and he froze for a moment, watching her face intently, willing her back to sleep. Then he carefully recapped the now-empty syringe, methodically placed it back in the wallet, and slipped it into his pocket. He leaned across the three still forms on the bed and lightly kissed Eli on the forehead, just partly in remembrance of his dear friend and their shared goals, then rose up and departed as quickly and silently as he had arrived. He had already closed and locked the front door when the tiniest of drops of blood welled up over the small pin-prick on Hannah's neck. She reached up in her sleep and gently brushed it away, then turned toward Oskar again, put her arm around him, and drifted off into an even deeper sleep than before, as her heart dutifully circulated her blood and its new emissary to the furthest extremities of her body over and over and over again.

Chapter 27: Oskar's Good Idea

“Wake up, Hannah! Your mom’s here.” Oskar extracted himself from the tangle of arms and legs, kissed Eli, and climbed out of bed. He tucked his shirt in, slipped on his shoes, and headed across the hall. He had been awake since 4:00AM, thinking about their experience in the cave and Jonathan’s explanation as to why they couldn’t grow their wings, and had had a revelation. Now he had to figure out how to present it to Hannah’s mother. If he couldn’t convince her now, Hannah would be grounded and vulnerable for four more long years.

Hannah and Eli lay there together, smiling at each other across the gap Oskar had occupied up until a few seconds ago. “Good morning, Hannah.” Eli pulled her over against her.

“Good morning, Eli.” She could feel the heat from the super-warm spot where Oskar had been lying. “Oskar’s a little furnace, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he’s always been that way, but especially after he infected himself in Blackeberg. Papa said his normal temperature went up to a vampiric 99 degrees, but I’m positive he’s much warmer than that, even now.”

Oskar poked his head in the door. “Come on, you two. Breakfast will be ready any minute now.

“Come warm me up first, Oskar.” Eli held out her arms. Hannah giggled.

Oskar grinned at her and disappeared down the stairs, thinking warm thoughts.

§

By the time Eli and Hannah made it to the table, everyone else had begun eating. Jack smiled and pulled out Hannah’s chair for her. “It’s about time! If you’d waited much longer, there wouldn’t have been a banger left to filch for Einstein.”

Hannah blushed. “Well, he deserves them. He saved our lives.”

Well, there are still plenty for everyone, Hannah. Even a couple extra for Einstein.” Elaine passed her the plate.

“Where’s Dad, Mom? He couldn’t make it?”

“He’s working with Jonathan this morning, Hannah. They’re making improvements to the robotic arm that your father recommended.”

“He’s really working on that?! I didn’t know he did stuff like that!” Oskar was excited. Hannah’s dad was really nice. He knew he could talk to him much easier than to Jonathan.

“He’s an electrical engineer, Oskar,” Papa said. He has some new ideas relating to the small servo-motors in the arm that Jonathan liked. I’m sure he’d be glad to talk to you about it if you’re interested.”

“I am, Dad” he paused. *It’s now or never.* “Mrs. Sandstrøm? I was thinking about your objection to Hannah getting the shot. It’s because of the Ejuice isn’t it? And what it’s made of?” Oskar tried his very best to sound respectful.

“Yes, Oskar.” She said, guardedly. She was really getting tired of defending her position on this, but Oskar had never approached her about it before. She was actually a bit curious as to where this might be going.

“Well...what if she never had to drink the Ejuice? Would you let her get the shot then?”

“I don’t know, Oskar. Richard? Has Jonathan found a synthetic?”

“No, Liva. He hasn’t.” Papa looked at Oskar carefully. *What is he up to?*

“Jonathan said the Ejuice is needed for Hannah to fly or to heal herself, but without the Ejuice she’d just be normal, like she is now, right?”

“That’s pretty much it, Oskar. It’s a bit more complicated than that, but you are essentially correct.” Jack was becoming curious. Oskar definitely had something in mind with this line of questioning, but it escaped him.

“When you buy a house or a car, don’t you always get insurance on it? In case something happens to it?”

“Yes, of course, Oskar, but what does that have to do with Hannah?” Livia couldn’t understand what Oskar was getting at either.

“Think of the shot as a kind of insurance, Mrs. Sandstrøm. If Hannah were to get hurt by someone, like the way Eli was shot, you could give her the Ejuice to save her life. It only takes a few minutes for it to work. Jonathan said so.” Oskar deliberately left the wings out of the discussion. He knew Mrs. Sandstrøm didn’t consider them that important in the scheme of things, but the healing? All he could do was hope.

“Oskar is exactly right, Liva! I hadn’t thought of it that way before. If Hannah had the shot, and the 24-hour incubation period were over, the Ejuice could save her life if she were severely injured. I like it! Oskar, you’re a genius!” Jack slapped him on the back. Everyone was looking at Livia now. Hannah held her breath, afraid to say anything at all.

“So Hannah and Jason could have the shot, and never have to drink the Ejuice?”

“Correct, Livia. And the same goes for Nils and yourself. We should have thought of this earlier,” Richard said.

“Okay.”

“What!? Mom, did you say ‘okay’?” Hannah couldn’t believe her ears.

“Yes Hannah. I may be opinionated, but I’m not intractable. The Ejuice was my only objection, so you may have the shot, under the condition that you not use the Ejuice unless... absolutely necessary.”

“Wait a bit, Livia. You DO remember that Hannah would have to drink a half-liter of Ejuice at the time she gets the shot, just to establish the neural networks?” Jack took her hand in his and squeezed it gently.

“I do remember, Jack.” *He didn’t have to remind me, but he did.* “And I appreciate all of you for indulging me in my, ‘prejudices,’ if you will. No matter how stupid you may think I am for having them.”

“Oh, Mom, I would never think that!” Hannah threw her arms around her.

Livia stood up abruptly. “I need to make a couple of phone calls. One to Nils, but I’m sure that one is unnecessary--we all know how he feels about this-- and the other to Jason. I feel I should tell him myself.” She smiled and retreated into the living room.

“Oskar, I simply adore you!” Hannah plopped down in his lap, put her arms around him and kissed him firmly on the lips.

He grinned at her, sheepishly. “I know you won’t be able to fly or anything, Hannah, but at least you’re closer, and safer...”

“Oh Oskar, don’t you see?! Maybe I can’t fly, but I’ll know that I could if I really needed to. And it means I’m technically a fairy, just like Eli. And you.” She kissed him gently on each cheek and squeezed him as tight as she possibly could. And he could feel her love and gratitude.

§

“That was a wonderful thing you did, Oskar. How did you ever think of it?” Eli rested her chin on his shoulder. It was their turn to sit in the waiting room while the Sandstrøm’s had their blood tests and received the injections.

“I just remembered the night in the cave, when you were freezing to death, Eli. And I thought about how helpless we were without the Ejuice, and how completely normal we were; and how weak. And then I remembered how fast you got your strength back after...”

“After you fed me?” She grinned at him.

“Yeah! And I remember how guilty you felt because I tasted so good!” he grinned at her.

She kissed him on the neck. “You’d taste good even if I didn’t have a vampire’s taste buds, Oskar.”

Jack laughed, then patted him on the back. “I owe you big-time too, Oskar. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to get around Livia on this, but never thought of approaching it that way. I can’t think of anyone who deserves this more than Hannah.”

“Hannah really likes you, Jack. She says you’re the only adult who really treats her like an adult.”

“That’s because, when it’s important, she thinks like one, Eli. And when it’s not...”

The door flew open and Hannah rushed in, beaming. She stepped up in front of Eli, eyes wide, and put her arms at her sides and raised them slowly. Eli gasped as she heard a familiar crackling sound. “Hannah! You’re...”

“Gottcha!” she giggled. She opened her hands and dropped two crumpled balls of cellophane on the floor, then wrapped her arms around Eli’s neck. “We’re identical twins again, Eli! Now I’m a fairy too!”

She kissed Oskar on the cheek, and then grabbed Jack around the waist and buried her face in his chest. “I love you all so much!” She twirled around and around, arms outstretched, then plopped down on the couch, dizzy.

“As I was saying; ‘...and when it’s not, she’s even more endearing.’” He kissed her on top of the head. “Congratulations, Hannah. May all your fairy dreams come true,” he whispered.

She looked up at him, eyes shining, “They will, Jack. I’m sure they will.”

Jason came in with his parents, just in time to hear the end of the conversation. “If you call me a fairy, Hannah, so help me, I’ll...”

“Get used to it, Jason! You’re a fairy now, like it or not. Like Hannah says, if you’re not a vampire you must be a fairy.” Eli taunted him.

“Let’s go outside, Eli. I want to feel the sun on my...wings and things.” She playfully clawed at Oskar, then headed for the door, followed by Eli, Oskar, and finally, Jason, who was curious in spite of himself. Nils and Livia followed worriedly behind them, casting apologetic glances at Richard and Elaine.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Rich. Tell me again exactly why Sava stopped by the other night?” Elaine said.

“I thought I explained all that, Elaine. He wanted to set things right, after he heard how upset we had been at Marcus’s death.”

“But he conceded essentially nothing, if I understood you correctly. All he promised you was that he’d let you know beforehand if he was going to kill anyone else, at the same time he emphasized that he would do what he thought best, whether or not you liked it. Jonathan could have relayed that message to us himself. He gave you zip. In fact, he never asked you anything about our plans for her future. He never even asked Eli what she wanted. If he was truly concerned about being on the same page with us, why wouldn’t he want to know?”

Richard looked at Jack. “He’s an odd duck, Elaine. Who knows what he’s thinking? He’s even older than Gudmund was, and doesn’t have the benefit of his education. He was a simple miller before he was turned.”

“Don’t let him fool you, Rich. A man as street-wise and determined as Sava can pick up a lot of knowledge in 300 years. Jonathan has assured me that Sava is extremely focused. He may not have Gudmund’s finesse or powers, but he’s certainly his equal in the keenness of his mind. He came to see us for a purpose, but what that purpose was, I can’t hazard a guess. He doesn’t strike me as a man who wastes his time on niceties.”

“Perhaps that’s why he left as you were arriving.” Jack kidded. “You are an adult, who has also been a vampire. Maybe he thought he couldn’t fool you.”

She smiled at him, “But he obviously fooled the both of you.”

Jonathan opened the door and glanced around the room. “Are the kids gone?”

“They’re outside, Jonathan. What’s the problem?”

“I’m...not sure, Richard. I just got the analysis of the blood samples from the Sandstrøms, then double-checked them against your own, including Eli’s and Oskar’s.” He paused. “Hannah is no longer immune to the bite of a vampire.”

“What?! But that’s impossible!” Richard took the chart from Jonathan and examined it carefully.

“When each of you received the shot activating the Strong and Weak neural networks, we noticed that the isolated strand of junk Vampiric DNA still remaining from the vaccine, tacked itself into one of the templates used by the weak neural networks to build the wings, claws, fangs, etc. We weren’t worried because it was still just a piece of junk DNA, but we used it as a simple indicator that the process had been successful. It wasn’t there in Hannah’s sample. Hannah is no longer immune, and in fact, may never have been immune.”

“But she was, Jonathan! It was there in the tests after the vaccine was given to all of us.”

“Well, it’s not there now.”

“Does this put Hannah in any danger, Jonathan?” Elaine examined the chart closely.

“Absolutely not, other than that she’s no longer immune. It served no purpose with this injection whatsoever, other than to give us a quick indicator that the process was successful. Hannah’s injection was successful, as proven by a second and third indicator.”

“But we need to understand what happened, Jonathan. And I don’t think we should re-inject her with the vaccine until we figure out what happened.” Richard was extremely upset. This was all cutting-edge science, and for the first time, he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of forging ahead as quickly as they had before covering all their bases. “With Sava as the only vampire in the vicinity as far as we know, I’m not worried about Hannah being bitten, but still...”

“Perhaps we’re becoming too complacent, Rich. We’ve had too much good luck, and it’s made us a bit arrogant. We need to slow down, I think.” Elaine took his hands firmly in hers. “If we’ve hurt Hannah in any way, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“No, no! She’s perfectly safe,” Jonathan insisted. “Don’t worry, Elaine. We’ll get right on it.” He grabbed the chart and headed for the door.

“Why am I not convinced then,” she called after him as he disappeared down the hall. “He’s way too sure of himself Rich. I know he means well but I just don’t trust him with this. Will you and Jack watch him carefully and confirm his results?”

“We will, Elaine. I promise,” Jack said firmly.

§

Eli awoke with a start. She could hear Einstein breathing softly, and the skitter of tiny feet in Hannah’s many-caged menagerie. “Good morning, Eli.”

She sat bolt upright in bed. “Oskar! Are you...” she groped for him blindly, then breathed a sigh of relief as he took her hand and squeezed it tightly. “I’m here, Eli. What is it?”

“Good morning, Oskar.”

It was his turn to sit up. “What!? Where are you, Hannah?”

“I’m here at home in bed. Einstein says ‘hello.’ So do Romulus and Remus, and Nip and Tuck.”

“Oh, Hannah! What’s happened? How can you...”

“I don’t know, Eli. All I know is that I’ve been watching you two sleep for the longest time, and I was getting bored waiting for you to wake up.”

Eli and Oskar could suddenly see through Hannah’s eyes as clearly as if they were in her room. They gasped simultaneously.

“Hannah, please. Don’t take this the wrong way, but could you please stop doing that? It’s making me dizzy.” Eli plopped back down on the bed.

“Doing what? Oskar’s doing it, isn’t he? I just thought that now that I’ve had the shot, Oskar could talk to me long distance instead of just touch-talking.”

“But I was asleep, Hannah. I can’t do it while I’m asleep,” Oskar pointed out.

“Oh, yeah. That’s right, but then...” suddenly she was gone.

“Hannah? Where are you?” Eli took Oskar’s hand, but it was no use.

“She’s too far away for me, Eli. I’ve never been able to talk to you when you were at Hannah’s house, remember?”

Eli’s cell phone rang loudly. She scrambled out of bed, grabbed it off her dresser, and jabbed the speakerphone button. “Hannah? What happened?”

“I got scared, Eli. And then I couldn’t see you anymore.”

“Try again, Hannah.” She looked expectantly at Oskar, and waited. Nothing happened.

“It’s no use, Eli. I can’t do it. It’s simply not working. I don’t know what to do to make it work again.”

“Maybe we should go to sleep again, and start over,” Oskar kidded.

“It’s not funny, Oskar. Hannah was talking to us. In fact, at first I thought I was really talking to her, not touch-talking.”

“You were, Eli. And so was I. We were talking like this,” *not like this*. He grinned at her. And then had a thought. “Hannah? How could you see us if we both had our eyes closed, and were asleep?”

“I...I don’t know, Oskar. Eli, I’m scared. What does it mean?”

“Could you really see us, Hannah? Or were you just remembering?” Oskar was really getting excited now.

“Your watch is on the window seat, both of your robes are on the floor next to the bed, and you’re in your underwear, Oskar.”

Oskar grabbed his robe off the floor and quickly put it on. “Hannah!!”

“Relax, Oskar. I can’t see you...anymore.” She giggled. “Besides I’ve seen you in your underwear, remember? That night we went swimming when you made fun of my fairy undies?”

“Yeah, but you’re fourteen now! And...”

“You’re funny, Oskar. Cute in your undies, but funny.”

Eli could imagine the Cheshire grin on her face. Hannah had found a new weakness she could exploit. She could almost hear the gears turning.

“Eli, I think I can see you again...yes I can! Oskar, that robe looks very nice on you. But your undies are still showing.”

Oskar blushed, tightened the robe and looked around the room anxiously. Hannah laughed.
“What’s he doing Eli?”

“He looks like he’s seen a ghost, Hannah!” they were both laughing now. “She got you, Oskar. Admit it!”

He grinned sheepishly. “Yeah you really did Hannah. You still can’t see us?” He took off his robe, just to make sure.

“No, Oskar! And I don’t know why. I don’t know why I saw you in the first place. It’s all so frustrating.”

Eli put her clothes on quickly. “Oskar, get dressed. We need to talk to Papa.”

“Get Jack too, Eli. I’m really starting to worry.” Hannah put her arms around Einstein’s neck and hugged him fiercely. All she had wanted was to have Eli’s wings. Now what did she have?

§

“Are you sure, Hannah? And you haven’t been able to do it since?” Jack was really concerned. And actually a bit frightened. This was something really different, and they couldn’t duplicate it. In fact, he and Richard had found nothing to indicate her telepathic abilities were any different than Eli’s or his own. They could all touch-talk, but only Oskar could relay thoughts over distance.

“No Jack. I’m really sorry! Some scientist I am! I should have been more observant. I didn’t even think about it when it happened, until it was over.”

“Hannah, you did nothing wrong. In fact, it’s all quite intriguing. I wish we could give you Ejuice. I’d give anything to be able to see what might develop then.”

Hannah grinned at him, “But Jack! Aren’t you worried about what might happen if I drank more Ejuice? Maybe my head would explode or something.”

“I...I’m sorry Hannah. You’re right. I shouldn’t...”

She laughed gleefully, “I’m just kidding Jack! I know you’d never suggest anything that could hurt me. I just know it!”

“No, you’re right to be concerned, Hannah, even if you didn’t mean it. I sometimes get carried away. It’s a fault of mine, as Henry never forgets to remind me.”

“It’s only a fault if you’re unaware of it Jack. And you’re aware of almost everything.” She squeezed his hand.

She trusts me too much, he thought to himself. *I’m not worthy of that much trust.*

Yes. You are, Jack.

He laughed. “I’ve got to learn to be careful what I think when you’re within touching distance, Hannah. Being a ‘fairy’ has its downside, as I’m beginning to realize.

“I don’t see ANY downside, Jack. Only good will come of all this. I know it.” It had only taken her a few hours to get over her fear and put her usual positive spin on everything.

“Well, as Eli says, ‘if Hannah says it’s so. It must be so.’ I have a great deal of faith in Eli, you know. I’ve known her for most of my life.” He winked at her. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, don’t you worry.” But he was keenly aware that they hadn’t yet told her about her lost immunity. And he wasn’t sure now was the right time.

“Who’s worried, Jack?” she grinned at him again. “It’s all just so very exciting!”

§

Ryan waved goodbye to his grandparents and boarded the train. He kind of enjoyed taking the redeye home from his visits, because he almost always got to spread himself out across the empty seats. He settled in, leaned back and closed his eyes, thinking about everything that had happened over the last few days.

He had called Eli just before he left the house, just to make sure she and Oskar were still doing okay, and to assure them both that he would call as soon as he got home. Eli told him Jonathan had insisted on it, largely because he was still investigating the extent of Marcus’s involvement with the church and how much he may have told them. She assured him that, once he knew the full extent of Marcus’s involvement with others, if any, they could all relax a bit.

If his attention hadn’t been focused on the cute girl with a sketch tablet in a seat two rows up, he might have eventually noticed the stocky, well-dressed fellow five rows behind him, who was watching him like a hawk. And after he struck up a conversation with her, he was pretty much oblivious to anything else, especially after she expressed an interest in his own artwork; in particular, a new one he had just finished the day before, depicting Mrs. Dawson as she flew across the meadow towards them that day. It was for a story he was writing, he told her. They

got on so well together that before he knew it, the train had pulled into the station, where he was quite delighted to find out that she also lived in Sunderland, and within a few kilometers of his own house. After hurriedly exchanging phone numbers and email addresses and promising to stay in contact, he headed for the passenger pick-up area to wait for his parents. He pulled out his cell phone, debating whether or not he should give Oskar a call so early, when he spotted his parents pulling up on the other side of the street.

He jumped up, hastily slipped the phone in his pocket, grabbed his luggage and started across the street, but was brought up short by a firm hand on his shoulder.

He turned around just as a bus lumbered past, so close he could feel the blast of air brush him back. “Be careful, young man. Or you may not get a chance to get much older.” The man, much shorter than himself, but impeccably dressed in a nicely-tailored suit, slowly relaxed his iron grip, bowed slightly, then turned and walked away, expressionless.

“Thanks...” He reached up and rubbed his shoulder. *Damn! It felt like he had me in a vise.*

“Over here, Ryan.” His mom waved to him.

He gathered up his luggage, carefully checked for traffic, then headed across the street.

Chapter 28: Hannah's Dreams

Hannah hung up the phone. Ryan had arrived safely at home, and had not only called Eli and Oskar, but had emailed them too.

“He emailed me too, Hannah. I just answered him,” Jason confirmed.

She breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing she had wanted was for their Good Samaritan to pay a price for his kindness. But now he was safe at home, far away from anyone who could harm him. “Jason, I’m so glad he’s safe! I know you really like him.”

He grinned at her. “Yeah, he’s a stand-up guy, Hannah. I’m hoping he’ll be able to come visit us on the island next summer, if he’s interested.”

“Are you kidding?! After Eli and Oskar told him about the caves, you wouldn’t be able to stop him. But I’m not sure Jonathan wants him to know where the island is, Jason. He says it may be too soon to risk letting outsiders in. And Ryan’s parents would certainly want to know where he was going.”

“Well, then. I’d better get started on convincing him.”

“Jason, you’ll be late if we don’t get moving!” Livia called up the stairs.

“Gotta go, H.B.” he grinned at her, and ducked out of the way as she swung at him. “Football is calling.” He pinned her arms to her sides and gave her a big hug, then disappeared down the stairs. “See ya later, Hannah Bananah.”

She grinned in spite of herself, then went back into her room and began cleaning and putting things away, a job she normally hated, but the mindlessness of it all was comforting to her right now. She was really tired. She and Eli had stayed up most of the night talking, even outlasting Oskar, who had finally given up and fallen asleep sprawled across the bed in his bucking bronco pajamas. They had become a running joke by this time and always got a response from both of them.

After she finished cleaning the cages and feeding and watering the fauna, she decided she’d lie down for a while. Mom and Jason wouldn’t get home for another couple of hours, and Dad was still working Saturdays with Jonathan, so no one would bother her, and she was so very tired...

She twirled around and around, arms outstretched. Eli laughed and clapped her hands. “Show me, Hannah! Show me your wings!” Hannah spun faster and faster, thinking wonderful fairy thoughts, until her skin turned opally-white, her fairy ears became pointy and elfish, and two tiny, delicate gossamer buds grew from her shoulder blades, opened like flowers, and unfurled into beautiful gossamer wings, which trembled and shuddered like the wings of a newly-emerged butterfly, then gradually grew and firmed up until their tips gently touched the ceiling. Eli stepped back and gasped, “Hannah they’re absolutely beautiful! They’re the most amazing wings I’ve ever seen!”

Hannah smiled at her, stepped up on her windowsill, and with her heart filled with joy, fell gently out the window, light as a feather, and let the wind carry her up and away from the house. She glanced back and saw the house and Eli's smiling face recede into the distance as she flew up toward the sun.

Her wings sparkled and shimmered, making tiny rainbows in the sky as she dove and darted back and forth aimlessly, feeling the warm air and sunlight on her skin. She imagined trails of fairy dust were following behind her in tight spirals, like the glittering tail of a comet. Finally, after making several rounds of the neighborhood, laughing gleefully as she successfully avoided being seen by a single soul by dropping quickly behind a chimney or losing herself in the thick foliage of a neighborhood tree, she fluttered down over the perfectly-manicured rose garden next to Old Finchliean's. After making sure no one was about, she mischievously snatched a perfect rose from a rose tree and fled guiltily across the field, hesitating for a moment over the huge old oak where her first great adventure with Eli had begun; then flew back to her open window where Eli was waiting for her, a big grin on her face. Exhausted but exhilarated, she fell back on her bed, wings outstretched behind her shimmering across her pillows and hanging gracefully off the edge of her bed, and fell quietly asleep, clutching the magnificent rose to her chest with both hands.

“Hannah! For God’s sake, put your clothes on and get your bum downstairs! It’s time for dinner! Have you been asleep all afternoon?” Jason grinned at her from the open doorway, reminded himself that she wasn’t a little girl any more, and quickly closed his eyes and turned around. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to...” he recovered quickly. “And where’d you get the rose? Have you got a secret admirer I don’t know about?”

Hannah sat up quickly, dropped the rose in her lap, blushed, then grabbed her shirt off the floor and pulled it on over her head. “Sorry,” she mumbled, hastily tucking it into her shorts. “I’ll be right down. What time is it anyway?” She stared at the rose, uncomprehendingly.

“Almost 6:30. Boy, you must have really been tired, Hannah. Are you feeling okay? You’re not sick or anything are you?”

She grimaced as the muscles in her back cramped up. “Jason, I had a really strange dream. I...” her voice trailed off. “I’ll be right down. Thanks for waking me up.” She looked at the rose again. “Jason? You didn’t put this here?”

“Not me!! I wouldn’t waste such a beautiful rose on my sister!” He ducked as Einstein’s ball whizzed past his head, caromed off the wall and bounced down the stairs, Einstein in hot pursuit. Jason winked at her and followed quickly behind him.

Hannah went over to the open window and stared at the house next door for a moment, knowing with a deep certainty that one of Einstein’s old leather bones was sitting on their roof, lodged next to the chimney right where she had seen it in her dream. She sighed, closed the window, and headed down the stairs. She hadn’t noticed her bare footprint plainly visible on the window sill.

§

Hannah gave Oskar a big hug, put her backpack in the back seat, and slid in next to Elaine. “Have fun, Oskar. I hope you and dad have a great time with the robot. Is Jason going too?”

“Yeah, he is. And it’ll be great. Jonathan will be there too, of course, but your dad doesn’t talk down to me. And you have fun with Eli. Since I won’t be there, you two can talk about me all night if you want to.”

“Believe me, we have much more interesting things to talk about...like my fairy wings. I’ve decided that mine are going to be gossamer white so you can tell us apart, Oskar.”

He laughed. “I can tell you apart anyway, Hannah.” *Like this. You can hide, but I’ll always know who and where you are now*, he gloated. *You’re just an ordinary fairy, like it or not...*

Suddenly, she was gone. But he was still looking right at her. *Hannah?* “Hannah?! How’d you do that?”

She flashed him an elfish grin as Elaine pulled away from the curb. *That’s for me to know, Oskar*, “and for you to find out.” And she was gone again.

He watched her, mouth open, until Mom’s car disappeared around the corner. *Mom? Is Hannah okay? How’s she doing that?*

He could feel the amused smile on her face. *I have absolutely no idea, Oskar*. He could see the triumphant grin on Hannah’s face through Mom’s eyes.

Bye, Oskar. And once again, she disappeared.

“Hannah, you’re full of surprises.” Elaine took her hand. *Can you do that even now?*

I don’t think so, Mrs. Dawson. But I wouldn’t do it to you anyway. It would be...disrespectful. Like turning my back on you, or refusing to answer a question.

Elaine smiled at her. “Hannah, sometimes you are so totally disarming, it takes my breath away.” She put her arm around her. “But you know Dr. Dawson. He’s going to have you in the lab over this; there’s no avoiding it you know.”

“I know, Mrs. Dawson. Eli told me about the card-guessing games he had Oskar and her play with each other in Karlstad.”

“And of course, Jack will want to be involved.” She winked at her.

“I know that too, Mrs. Dawson.” Her eyes twinkled.

§

Hannah sat down next to Eli on her bed. “Are you going to be okay without Oskar, Eli?”

“Of course, Hannah. I don’t have to sleep with Oskar every night. I just like to. There’s a difference. Besides, you’ve always been my second choice, even if you’re not as warm.” She grinned at her. “Well, this will be a first. Oskar’s spending the night with Jason, and you’re spending the night with me!”

“But Oskar’s not sleeping with Jason, Eli. He’s sleeping in my bed. Boys are funny that way; they feel uncomfortable sleeping in the same bed with another boy once they get older. Why do you suppose that is?”

Eli giggled. “I have absolutely no idea, Hannah. They’re funny in other ways too. It’s okay for girls to wear boys’ clothes, but boys will never wear girls’ clothes.”

“You’re right, Eli. Even if they look the same! Once Jason accidentally put on one of my shirts, but as soon as he realized the buttons were on the wrong side, he took it off so fast! It was as though it had cooties or something.” They both laughed.

“But Oskar doesn’t mind wearing those silly bucking bronco pajamas, Hannah. Why is that?”

“Because they’re still boy’s clothes, Eli, and he always gets a reaction from us. But try to get him to wear your fairy pajamas! It’ll never happen.”

“I’ll bet I could get him to wear them, Hannah.”

“Willingly? Without complaining?”

“Yep!”

“It’s a bet!” They shook hands on it. “And whoever loses has to throw Oskar in the pool.”

They burst out laughing. “Perfect, Hannah! It’s a win-win for both of us!”

“The night is young! What should we do?” Hannah spun around, arms outstretched. “I know! Grow your wings for me, Eli. I want to see them again! Please?!” She still hadn’t told Eli about her dream, and felt guilty that it was so easy for her to keep it from her. All-in-all, she wasn’t sure she liked this new-found ability of hers.

“Okay, Hannah.” She took off her shirt, put her arms at her sides and grew her wings for her. She made them especially large, like the night she carried her to Hyde Park, then raised her arms over her head, displaying them at their very best.

Hannah walked around her, examining them carefully, running her fingers over them. “They’re so soft and velvety, Eli. And so black! I guess that’s an evolutionary plus isn’t it? I mean it allows vampires to stalk their prey at night better, huh?”

“And more importantly, they don’t show dirt.” Eli grinned at her.

“How about the claws and talons?” Hannah teased. “I haven’t seen those yet.”

Eli kicked off her shoes, flexed her toes and fingers, and grew a magnificent set of talons and beautifully clawed hands.

Hannah stepped back quickly. “Wow! You look downright dangerous, Eli.” She grinned at her mischievously. “Can you make the claws some color other than black? Like pink or red maybe? You’d look even more dangerous if they were red.”

Eli concentrated a minute, but the best she could do was a kind of dirty gray. “I’ll talk to Mama. Maybe she has some ideas. After all, she makes tools out of her claws.”

“Well, you could save a fortune on nail polish if you could color your own nails.”

“I think nail polish is stupid...no offense, Hannah.”

“Well...it was just an idea. How about your wings? Can you make them white? For flying in the day?”

“I don’t know, Hannah. I doubt it, though. White wings on a vampire wouldn’t be of much use would they?”

“But you’re not a vampire, Eli. You’re a fairy, remember?”

“If you say so, Hannah.” She retracted her wings, claws and fangs, grabbed her towel and headed for the bathroom. “I’m taking my shower now, Hannah. Can you entertain yourself for a few minutes?”

“You think I need you to have fun? I have my superior imagination to keep me occupied.” She grinned at her.

As soon as she heard the shower running, Hannah took off her own shirt and stood in front of the full length mirror on the back of the door. She put her hands at her sides, and slowly raised them, and imagined her own set of pure white, velvety wings. For now at least, the wings from her dream were off-limits. Wings were not supposed to grow out of her back, as much as she wished they could. She had to be at least a bit realistic about this. She turned around slowly, remembering the times before she met Eli when she had so loved fairies that she would stand in front of her mirror at home and imagine herself with fairy wings, and pointed ears, and antennae coming out of the top of her head, just like in the books of fairies her mom had gotten her when she was eight. *It won’t be long now*, she thought to herself. *I’m only a half-liter of Ejuice away from my dream.* She closed her eyes, and spun around and around...

Even in the shower, Eli could hear Hannah laughing. But when it didn't stop, her curiosity got the better of her. She quickly rinsed off, grabbed her towel, and rushed into her room.

"Eli! Look! We're not twins anymore!" She started laughing again and spun around slowly so Eli could get an even better look.

Eli gasped. Except for having no wings at all, Hannah looked exactly like the Archaeogenetics fairy logo -- complete with the most beautiful set of pointed ears she had ever seen.

"It wasn't a dream! Oh, Eli! It wasn't a dream after all! Can you see them too? Pinch me so I know I'm not dreaming now!"

Eli reached up and gently touched Hannah's ear. "How do you do that, Hannah? I can't do it at all. I wouldn't even know how to begin."

"Maybe it's like wiggling your ears, Eli. Some people can do it, and some simply can't, no matter how hard they try. I've always been able to wiggle my ears." Which she proceeded to do, to Eli's delight.

"Your ears are absolutely adorable, Hannah! But, if you can do that, what else can you do? Can you grow wings? Hannah, can you grow wings?" Hannah took her hand gently and looked into her eyes. Suddenly, Eli saw Hannah's dream flight, complete in every detail, including the rose.

"Is it real Hannah?! Did it really happen?"

Hannah pulled a slightly disheveled rose out of her backpack and handed it to her. Eli took the rose and without saying a word, laid it next to her picture of Gudmund and his wife on their wedding day. *This is for you, dear Gudmund. I know this is something you've done. I absolutely know it!*

"Do you really think so Eli?"

"Yes, Hannah. I really do." She looked at Hannah, startled, as the realization sunk in. Hannah had heard her as easily as Oskar could. "Hannah, you can hear me again, like Oskar. *Can you hear me now, Hannah? My Hannah with the pixie ears?*

Hannah smiled at her. "I can, Eli! And without touching." She looked down at her feet for a moment. "Your mom and dad are in the kitchen. They're talking about Jonathan, and how they're not sure they can trust him..." she turned red. "I...I'm sorry Eli. I promise I won't do that again. It's not right for me to listen to them like that." She grinned and closed her eyes. "But Oskar and Jason are different..." She shook her head. "Boring!! They're talking about Riven again...and a girl Jason likes at school."

"What about Jack, Hannah. Can you hear Jack?"

“I’d never do that to Jack, Eli. Absolutely never!” She caught a fleeting glimpse of Jack’s computer screen and a cup of tea sitting on a badly-stained corner of his desk, the only spot not heaped with books and papers, but turned it off quickly and decisively.

“But Hannah, can you grow wings? Without the Ejuice?” Eli asked again, softly.

“I don’t know, Eli. It appears as though I did in my dream, but out of my back? It’s not possible – is it?” But she remembered how sore the muscles in her back had been after Jason woke her up. “How do I do it, Eli? You helped Oskar the first time. Help me now.” She felt light-headed just thinking about it. If she could do this without Ejuice, what would it mean?

“Put your arms at your sides, Hannah. Then imagine that the skin on your arms and the skin on your sides are connected. Then clench your fists tightly, and slowly raise your arms.”

Hannah put her hands at her sides, closed her eyes, clenched her fists and slowly raised her arms. Nothing.

“It’s not working, Eli!” she was totally exasperated. *Why can’t I do this?!*

“Maybe you do need the Ejuice, Hannah. After all, everyone else does. Maybe your dream was just a dream. Maybe Jason put the rose there as a joke.”

“I dreamed the rose, Eli. How could Jason have known that?” she paced back and forth.

Eli grinned. “I know Hannah! We need Pixie Dust.” She grabbed a tube of glitter out of her paint box and poured some in her hand. “This is serious, Hannah. I’m not kidding. Now spin around slowly,” she said in a low voice, suppressing a smile.

Hannah grinned at her, closed her eyes and spun slowly around and around, arms out. Eli took careful aim, then tossed the glitter in the air over Hannah’s head, where it seemed to hang motionless for a moment, then cascaded down around her, sparkling and glittering, just as it should.

Hannah thought about her dream, and how happy she had been when she stepped up on the sill unafraid, and looked up toward the sun...

§

Ryan had already seated himself at an outside table by the window at the William Jameson when he saw the bus pull up down by John St. He recognized Janice as soon as she stepped off the bus.

The two of them had gotten on famously since the trip home. She had called him before noon, he had called her the same evening and today they were finally out together –for an evening at the museum and Winter Gardens, and afterwards, a film; a special viewing of a restored version of *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, a film, they had discovered, that both of them liked.

He stood up and waved. She spotted him, waved back and hurried over to his table. “Hi Ryan! What have you got for me?”

He grinned at her, laid a large envelope on the table and pulled out his finished drawing. “What do you think?”

“Ryan, it’s fabulous!” She looked at it carefully. “Those wings are amazing! And the look on her face! I’d hate to be on the receiving end of that look.”

“You’d have that look on your face too, if you were trying to protect your children.”

“Her children? You’re going to have to fill me in on this story of yours. It sounds really interesting.”

He grinned at her. “I will, but not right now. I’m kind of superstitious. Whenever I tell anyone an unfinished plotline to one of my stories, it seems to go all to hell. But I’ll tell you as soon as it’s finished, I promise.”

“Well, that’s a promise I’m going to hold you to. Are you sure you can’t tell me anything?”

“Well...She has two children. But one of them, a girl, has an identical twin, born 200 years after her, who has an older brother.”

“Wow! It sounds like a sci-fi soap opera... No offense,” she added quickly.

“None taken...unless you don’t like sci-fi soap operas.”

“Actually, I think I’m going to love this one.” She smiled at him.

And he was hooked. That smile was 60% of the reason he had called her. The fact that she liked his drawings was another 60% of the reason. And the realization that she was really smart, and still willing to put up with him, was worth another 70%. He didn’t much care that it all added up to more than 100%; something Jason had pointed out to him when he called to tell him he was going out with her tonight.

§

Time flew by, as it is wont to do when everything goes even better than expected. They sat and talked for over two hours over dinner, and were enjoying themselves so much they opted out of the film, a bit of a downer even under the best of times. The Winter Gardens and Museum were almost magical to the both of them, even though they had both been there many times before. Seeing it all through each other’s eyes and in each other’s company, made all the difference in the world.

Her bus was due to arrive in 45minutes, and Ryan had finally made up his mind that he was going to escort her home, rather than part company at the bus stop. He knew that a bit of fast-

talking would convince his brother to come pick him up, even though it might cost him later, but whatever it cost him would be worth it, he decided.

“Let’s walk around the lake while we’re waiting! It’s so warm out tonight, and it’s so pretty in the park,” Janice suggested.

By this time, Ryan was willing to go anywhere with her. And the park looked really different at night, even though the paths were all well-lit; almost unnecessary, at least in the vicinity of the Winter Gardens, which threw off enough light to illuminate the small lake and the surrounding area quite effectively. They walked together into the park along the Toward Road side next to the lake for a while, then, as they turned right on the path bordering the lake, Janice paused and glanced behind her.

“What’s wrong, Janice? You’re not afraid of the dark are you?” He grinned at her.

She laughed. “Not at all, but there seems to be someone following us. I noticed him twice in the museum and again just as we started into the park. Don’t look!” she grabbed his arm and kept him from turning around. “I thought I was just imagining it, but this is way too much of a coincidence.”

“What does he look like?”

“He’s about your height but stocky; probably 15 pounds heavier. He’s wearing a black jogging outfit, brown jacket, and black trainers. He has brown hair and blue eyes.

“Wow! You don’t miss anything do you? Does he part his hair on the left or right,” he joked.

“Left, which may mean he’s left-handed.” She stuck her tongue out at him.

“My part, when I have one, is on the left, and I’m right-handed. So much for that idea.”

“Hmm. I guess I’ll have to rethink my theory.” She stepped in front of him, turned around, and started walking backwards. “But that doesn’t solve our immediate problem. He’s still following us.” She put her hand on his shoulder, spun around gracefully and walked rapidly ahead of him towards the bronze walrus on the edge of the lake. He hurried to keep up with her.

She plopped down on the walrus’s back and patted its rump. Ryan took the hint and sat down beside her, giving them both an unobstructed view of the path as it turned right and went behind the trees along the lake. Sure enough; the man stepped out of the trees, glanced at them, then put his hands in his pockets and stared out across the lake, pretending to ignore them.

“Every time I see the walrus, I keep wondering where the carpenter is,” he said loudly.

“I think they ran out of money before they could cast him.” Janice played along. There was plenty of light here, and there were at least eight people just on other side of the lake by the

Winter Gardens who could plainly see them sitting there. She didn't feel as though they were in any immediate danger, but she still felt uneasy.

Ryan was getting angry. A perfect evening was being spoiled by this...idiot. He'd had enough. He abruptly stood and strode rapidly across the circle towards the man before he could react. "Why are you following us?! Who are you anyway?"

"Ryan! Don't..."

But it was too late. As soon as he spotted the shoulder holster under the man's jacket, he knew he was in deep trouble. The people on the other side of the lake suddenly seemed very far away. And the irony of the situation didn't escape him. The holster was under his right arm. The man was left-handed.

Chapter 29: New Relationships

Oscar stared out the bay window, imagining Eli and Hannah sitting in the tree across the road, just like on that first night, staring back at them. Jason knew what he was thinking just by the expression on his face. “I still remember how shocked I was when I saw Eli for the first time, Oskar. I simply couldn’t believe it! I actually dragged them both across the street, into the house, and stood them in front of Mom and Dad, I was so excited. Poor Eli looked scared to death!”

“She was, Jason. She hates to lie and she was afraid she’d have to lie to your parents, not to mention both you and Hannah. And she had already decided that Hannah was her soul-mate.”

Jason laughed. “That’s what Hannah told me too, Oskar. I guess it was love at first sight.”

“And Hannah was the main reason Eli decided to get cured.”

“Really?! I always thought you had talked her into it.”

“Nope! I didn’t care one way or the other. As long as we were together, I didn’t care what her decision was – and I still don’t.” he paused. “But I think she made the right decision. You’re a really good friend Jason. And I never would have known you if Eli hadn’t decided to be cured.”

“And you wouldn’t have been around to help save my life.”

“But it wouldn’t have been in danger if we hadn’t met.”

“But we did meet, and you did save my life. And that makes us sort of...brothers now.” He looked down at his feet. “Because of Eli and Hannah being sisters, you know,” he added quickly.

Oskar was touched. “I...I’ve never had a brother. I was always on my own, and was pretty unhappy before Eli.”

“Well, you have one now, like it or not. And those jerks had no idea what you are really like.” Jason sat down at the table, fiddled with his notebook for a moment, then looked up at Oskar. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Sure, as long as I don’t have to answer.” He grinned at him.

“That night at your house, when I came downstairs and found Hannah talking to your dad, and he got so angry. Had you and Eli...you know.”

“No, no! We didn’t do...that. We would never...not in front of Hannah. It would have been awful! We simply couldn’t! And wouldn’t.”

“But...I don’t understand then. Why was your dad so angry?”

“Partly because he thought we had, Jason. And more importantly, he thought we were taking advantage of Hannah, which we would never, never have done! And he was all the madder yet because Eli and I put you and Hannah in the position where you might have to lie to your parents to protect us.” Oskar felt like he had to make Jason understand. It was embarrassing to talk about, but making Jason understand was important to him now.

Jason was confused. “But...haven’t you ever...”

“...yeah, we have.” He walked over to the window. If he told Jason about it, would that make him no better than the boys who boasted in the locker room? He shook his head. *This is not the same. This isn’t like that at all.* “That night after Mr. Toulson shot Eli, and I thought she was going to die. That was the first time.” He turned around and looked at Jason, holding back his tears. “And when I thought about how awful it would have been, it made me love her all the more. And then, it just sort of ...happened.”

Jason swallowed and looked away. He was surprised, mainly because he had thought that, by now it would be almost an everyday occurrence for them. But to realize their first time was only a week ago, and he could fully understand the reasons... “I’m...sorry Oskar. I hope I didn’t embarrass you. But I sure embarrassed myself. It’s really none of my business. I just... I think I’ll stop talking now.” He grinned at him.

“It’s okay, Jason.”

In spite of the fact that Jason was two years older than Oskar mentally, he was acutely aware of the fact that Oskar was born in 1970. And his maturity in some things always caught him by surprise. He couldn’t imagine any normal 14-year-old kid admitting to such a thing so readily and so specifically; even to his real brother. And his manner was so sincere and unassuming. He had never met anyone quite like him.

“You’re lucky, Oskar. You know that, right?”

“What do you mean?” Oskar held his breath. He remembered the locker room talk in his old school, and the degrading way most of the boys talked about girls. *If Jason starts in with this stuff, I’ll...*

“Because you love her so much. And she loves you. It’s just so obvious in everything you do. Even when you fight, I can tell. You’re really lucky.”

“I do love her, Jason. And she’s my best friend, too.” Oskar breathed a sigh of relief; Jason had just passed his first Big Brother test.

Jason grinned at him. “That must be it then. That’s what my dad says about my mom.”

Oskar laughed, “Dad calls himself the queen’s consort, whatever that means. Mom calls Dad her sparring partner.”

“I guess that’s sort of the same thing, Oskar.” He pushed his chair back, suddenly eager to change the subject. “Let’s go see if we can finish Riven tonight. I understand there’s another sequel in the works, and we need to finish this one before it comes out. What do you say?”

“Let’s do it!” Oskar followed him into his room.

§

It was 3:00AM before they finally wrapped it up, victorious. Oskar flopped down on the bed, hands behind his head, exhausted, and fell asleep even before Jason had backed everything up and shut down his computer. He thought about waking Oskar up and sending him to Hannah’s room, but he looked so comfortable, he just didn’t have the heart. He carefully slid him over a bit, threw the blanket over him, and slipped into bed beside him. He too was sound asleep in minutes.

§

Hannah stopped spinning, “Someone doesn’t believe, Eli.” She said crossly. You have to believe or it doesn’t work.”

“Okay, okay! Ya got me. I believe, Hannah. I really do.” She grinned at her. “But a little Ejuice wouldn’t hurt...”

“Nope! I don’t need it.” Her dream had been too vivid to have been just a dream. She was certain of it now. She concentrated, and thought about how tired she had been and how she had laid down on the bed, and imagined Eli, clapping and cheering ...She turned around and faced the window.

“Hannah, what are you doing?” She squinted and moved closer, unwilling to believe what she was seeing. She reached out, hesitated, then pulled her hand back. Two small translucent buds formed on Hannah’s back over her shoulder blades and grew rapidly until finally, they bloomed like tiny tea roses, twitched, and became still for a moment as though catching their breath, then the tiny petals began overlapping one another like tiny scales, twisting and combining with one another in waves, until out of the chaos, huge, trembling butterfly-like wings unfurled, gossamer white. Again a pause, then the impossibly-thin tubes, barely supporting the fragile mix of wrinkled silkiness, intricate patterns, and veins of iridescence, inflated rapidly until, with a soft cellophane crackle, straightened and firmed up the shimmering mass into two sets of forewings and hindwings. They opened and closed slowly like the wings of a butterfly sunning itself, lightly touching each other behind her, and then brushing Eli gently back against the wall as they opened out.

“Mama! Papa!” she yelled. “Come quick!” Hannah’s grown wings!” She flung open the door and yelled again.

Mama was there in an instant. Eli could hear Papa running up the stairs after her. “Eli did you give her Ejuice? You know you weren’t supposed to do that. Livia will be...”

“No Mama! She did it without Ejuice. And she grew fairy ears, and she’s...absolutely beautiful!” There were tears in her eyes. “She’s beautiful,” she whispered. She threw open the door.

The three of them stood there, mouths open. Hannah was standing on the widow seat in front of the now-open window gazing down into the back yard. Her wings were moving gracefully back and forth in slow figure-eight patterns from forewing tip, to hindwing base, like a butterfly’s in slow-motion just before it launches itself from the tattered remnants of its birthing cocoon. She turned toward them and smiled, her now-ethereal face framed by her delicate fairy ears.

Papa almost stumbled over the desk chair. Eli was right. She was preternaturally beautiful now, no longer Hannah, but something...more. He gasped as she leaned forward, put her hands on the window frame as if to steady herself, and stared up into the night sky. “Hannah! Please don’t...You don’t know how. You could hurt yourself. Please...”

She looked over her shoulder and smiled at him -- a soft, reassuring smile -- then cocked her head to the side as though she were straining to hear something; something she desperately needed to hear. She hesitated a moment and opened her mouth as though she was going to speak to them, then turned quickly, rose up on the tips of her toes, and launched herself out the window into the darkness. The soft flutter of her wings faded rapidly away.

Eli screamed and ran for the window, but it was too late. Hannah was gone. She jumped up on the window sill, grew her wings, and leaped into the darkness after her.

§

As startled as he was to see that the man was armed, Ryan stood his ground. If something happened, he wanted to see it coming, and if he ran, and this ... stalker chose to shoot him, he would never know. He’d wink out of existence, never knowing. And Janice...what had he gotten her into? He felt a flash of regret as he remembered the concerns of Dr. Dawson and Mr. Törnkqvist about all the nameless dark forces that might want to harm them because of what they knew and what they were. And he had dragged this wonderful girl into the thick of the mess. Without turning around, he motioned her back. “Janice, get the hell out of here! Run! Go straight to the police!”

He backed away slowly, but he was too late. The man grabbed him firmly by the wrist. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Let go of me or I’ll...”

“You’ll what? Resist arrest? I’m with M15. You’d best stop struggling or I’ll have no choice but to arrest you, Ryan. And Janice too.”

How did he know my name? And Janice! I just met her two days ago... Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan saw Janice heading purposefully towards them, holding her cellphone. “I’m ringing the police! Let him go!”

“Hang it up, or I’ll arrest you both,” he growled “Believe me, you don’t want things to get any more complicated than they are already.”

“You can’t be with M15. You’re too bloody ugly. James Bond you’re not!” Ryan struggled, to no avail. The man was just too strong for him and knew how to use his weight to his advantage. He turned toward Janice just in time to see a dark form move silently up behind her.

“I think you’d best do as you’re told, young lady. This man won’t hesitate to use his weapon if you provoke him further.” Sava took her wrist firmly in one hand, grabbed her phone with the other, and slipped it in his pocket.

“Who the hell are you? Step away from the girl and hold your hands out where I can see them.”

Sava smiled at him and stepped to the side, holding out his hands. “I’m just a good Samaritan, helping out Scotland Yard. And you’re welcome.”

“Don’t be a smart-ass! Just walk away and mind your own business.”

Sava crossed his arms over his chest, and stood there quietly, waiting.

“I recognize you! You kept me from stepping in front of the bus!” *Damn! I should have kept my mouth shut*, Ryan thought to himself. Things were getting way too complicated way too fast.

The man’s grip tightened on his wrist. “You know this man? Both of you! Put your hands behind your head and get on your knees.” He swiftly pulled out his gun and leveled it at Sava.

“Do what he says, love. He’s quite dangerous, and somewhat unpredictable,” Sava whispered. He took her hand firmly and knelt down. Janice looked at him carefully, trying to decide whether or not to make a run for it, then reluctantly followed suit, not quite sure why she complied so easily. But she felt strange. It was almost as though she had known what he was going to say a split second before he said it. And for a brief second, she had been certain that her best option was to do exactly what he said. It had been such a powerful thought, it had made her head swim.

“Good! Now hands behind your head, quickly,” He whispered. He let go of her hand, and the strange feeling of déjà vu faded quickly away. Even so, her strong feeling that she could trust this man, this total stranger, (*Sava?*) who had just lifted her new phone, lingered. She put her hands behind her head.

“Now, you’ve really done it.” Sava spoke softly and measuredly, “You were just supposed to keep tabs on them, weren’t you? But things got out of hand when this astute young lady spotted you and this brave but brash young man confronted you. And now you, in turn, have done something even more foolish. You’ve turned a mere suspicion into a certainty. How are you ever going to make this right with your superiors, of which I’m certain there are many. How do you ever expect to move any further up the food chain after this enormous error in judgment?”

“I...I don't know what you're talking about. There's been a robbery at the Money Shop, and these two match the description of the perpetrators.” He lowered his gun and let go of Ryan, who wisely remained right where he was.

“Well then! In that case, I suggest you have made a mistake. They're carrying nothing but an envelope and the young lady's purse. No room for any loot there! And since you've been following them for some time now, it's unlikely they could have stashed it anywhere without your eagle-eyes having spotted it. Why don't we just forget the whole episode? I'm sure these nice young folks are willing to forgive and forget.”

Janice and Ryan nodded vigorously.

Sava stood up, stepped forward and put his arm around the man's shoulder. “You need to relax a bit. You're taking your job far too seriously.”

“I had every reason to suspect them. They matched the description perfectly.”

“Yes, Yes, I understand. Ryan? Janice? I hope this little misunderstanding hasn't ruined this pleasant evening for you. But you'd best be on your way now, or you could miss your bus.”

“May I please have my phone back?”

“It's in your purse Janice.”

She rummaged through her purse, then looked up at him, surprised. “How did you...”

Hurry along, now. That's a good girl.” He smiled at them.

They hurried around the lake and made it to the bus stop with a few minutes to spare. “Janice? Why didn't you run when you had the chance?”

I...I couldn't just leave you there. I had to do something.”

“I was stupid to confront him that way. I was just showing off. And I put you in danger by doing it. I'm sorry.”

“I should have taken him more seriously when I first spotted him. If I had, he never could have caught us alone. It's my fault.”

“Yeah, I guess that means we're both pretty stupid, huh?” They grinned at each other.

Janice kissed him on the cheek. “You're a nice guy, Ryan.” She paused, “But seriously, who was that other guy? Sava, I mean.”

“He told you his name?”

“Yeah, he did...I think.” *Did he? I can’t remember.* “Yes. It’s Sava. He whispered it to me.”

“He pulled me away from the curb at the train station the night you and I met. I was about to step in front of a bus.”

“How did he know my name, then? For that matter, how did either of them know our names? If that other man was M15 and was looking for thieves, which isn’t even the job of M15, by the way, how could he possibly have known our names? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t does it? I was thinking the same thing. And if he was after us in particular, how did this *Sava* manage to talk him out of it? The guy didn’t strike me as particularly weak-minded. It was too easy.”

“For that matter, after Sava grabbed me and snatched my phone, why would I even consider following his instructions so readily. Yet I did.” She looked down at her feet. “And strangely enough, I really FELT that I could trust him. He was a strange duck.”

“Strange or not, he sure took control of the situation nicely. I’m glad he was on our side, whoever he is.”

They stepped back as the bus pulled up to the curb. They climbed aboard, found a seat near the back, and did their very best to salvage what they could of their fascinating evening together. But Janice still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this whole episode than met the eye. There were too many contradictions and unanswered questions, and Ryan was acting a bit odd. “Ryan? What’s going on? I don’t think you’re leveling with me.”

I...I can’t, Janice. Because I might be wrong about what it all means. I promise you though; I’m going to talk to some friends of mine tonight, and if they agree to it, I’ll tell you everything.” He pulled his drawing out of the envelope and stared at it. “In the meantime, I want you to keep this for me. Would you do that?”

“Of course! But why?”

“Because then you’ll have to see me again, so you can return it.” He grinned at her.

“Pretty unsure of yourself aren’t you? Well, I’m here to tell you this has been one of the most interesting dates I’ve ever had.” She paused, “Even before the walk in the park.”

Damn! There’s that smile again.

§

“You and I have things that we need to work out.” Sava tightened his grip on the man’s neck, and listened carefully to Ryan’s and Janice’s conversation through the background noise, until they were safely at the bus stop.

“I’d be careful if I were you. The people I work for aren’t as prone to mistakes as I am. And you don’t really want to cross them.” The man tried to twist away, to no avail.

“I have no doubt. I know them well. Fortunately, they know nothing of me, and that’s the way it’s going to have to stay, at least for a while longer.” He squeezed harder until the man slipped into unconsciousness, then he slowly eased him to the ground. After checking his pulse, he threw him over his shoulder and moved swiftly into the darkness toward the south end of the park, away from the Winter Gardens.

§

Elaine stripped her shirt off and quickly followed Eli out the window. “Richard, if you haven’t heard from us in ten minutes, see if you can get hold of Oskar. We may need him. Something wasn’t quite right with Hannah. Her behavior was out of character.” She disappeared into the darkness.

She found Eli almost immediately, frantically circling higher and higher over the house. “Eli? Keep doing what you’re doing, but widen your circles a bit. If she flew straight out, she could be miles away by now. Use your eyes! Use your ears! I’ll head toward her house on the off-chance she may have decided to surprise Oskar and Jason; that is if she’s still thinking normally. Those wings, as beautiful as they were, didn’t look air-worthy to me at all, and certainly weren’t designed for speed, like ours. If she went that way, I should catch up with her quite soon.” She immediately veered off to the north.

Eli flew high over the house, and with each circle, covered more ground until she was as far out as Seth’s house, the old grammar school, and the old factory to the southeast. But there was nothing. It was as though she had vanished off the face of the earth. Her eyes were as good as they had ever been, and she raked the ground with them, in effect rendering the blackness of night into an almost daytime clarity. But, other than the movements of stray dogs, cats, and assorted night-ranging animals, nothing moved. She was certain of it. She scanned the horizon, and adjusted her eyes into the infra-red spectrum, all to no avail. Even Hannah’s warm-blooded silhouette was nowhere to be seen. And she was growing more and more frightened by the minute. She wasn’t even sure she was still looking for the Hannah she knew and loved. The creature that turned and left her behind didn’t behave like Hannah at all. *Hannah! Please talk to me! Where are you? Please, please let me find you safe.*

Chapter 30: Hannah's Reality

Richard paced back and forth in the kitchen. Twice he grabbed the phone, then hung it up again. Ten minutes right now seemed like forever. *What have I done? I pushed as hard as anyone for her injection. This is my fault. If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself.* He realized that, with Oskar out of range and Hannah, for whatever reason, not communicating with them at all, he had absolutely no idea where anyone was right now. Hannah's silence was the most disturbing of all, because it was so unlike her. Especially if she were happy, as she should be right now. After all, she was flying for the first, or possibly second, time in her life; something she had dreamed about since she was a small child. He couldn't help but think something terrible had happened to her, or she would be talking to them incessantly.

Unless she was no longer Hannah. That was certainly the feeling he had when he saw her, a small, delicate-winged fairy framed in the gable window; feral, tense and fidgety, almost like a frightened rabbit. The impression had been so strong that he had been afraid to breathe for fear any movement on his part would send her off. Her fleeting smile was the last remaining thing that linked her to humanity before she disappeared out the window.

He sat down at the table and put his head in his hands.

He jumped at the sound of the doorbell. He hurried to the door, jerked it open and...

There she was.

It took a second for the reality of it to penetrate his fear and anxiety, but there she was, shivering, and looking smaller and more fragile than he had ever seen her before. Her hair was a complete mess and caked with dirt. He could see scratches on her face and hands. Maggie had her arm around her to steady her, and she was wearing a heavy sweatshirt that hung almost down to her scraped knees.

He put his arms around her gently. "Hannah, I was so worried about you! Thank God you're safe. What happened?"

"I...I," she burst into tears and put her head on his shoulder.

"I was in the kitchen, Richard, and I heard a loud thump just under the kitchen window. When I rushed outside, there she was, tangled up in the very same poor bushes that had just begun to recover from Eli's bike accident. It took me a few seconds to realize she had wings, but I had no sooner realized it when they folded in on themselves and just...disappeared. And all that was left was the sad spectacle you see before you now." She smiled and kissed Hannah gently on the cheek. "She was shivering from the cold, so I carried her inside, grabbed one of Jack's sweatshirts and bundled her up in it."

"Is this really Jack's? I'm so sorry! Now it's ruined!" She sobbed quietly to herself. Maggie and Richard led her into the kitchen and sat her down at the table. Richard quickly placed her cup in front of her and one in front of Maggie, and filled them with hot tea, eliciting a brief smile from

Hannah. “Thanks, Mr. Dawson.” Her hand shook as she reached for the cup, so she very carefully picked it up in both hands.

“Hannah, are you up to telling Eli and Eli’s Mama that you’re safe, and to come back home? Have you enough strength left to do that?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dawson! I’ll do it now!” She closed her eyes for a second, instantly felt their relief and joy, then closed the door again, afraid of the anger and disappointment she was sure would follow quickly. She took a deep breath and put on her game face. “They’re coming.” She grinned sheepishly. “I don’t think Eli is very happy with me, though.”

“Thank you, Hannah,” he said softly. “Maggie, I can’t thank you enough! I’m glad that, as long as she had to fall out of the sky, she landed on your house.”

“Think nothing of it, Richard. Perhaps I’ll install a sturdy net there and take down the bushes. That spot seems to attract fairies and we certainly wouldn’t want any of the precious things getting seriously injured now, would we?” she winked at Hannah, stood up and buttoned her jacket. “I’ll leave you two alone now. I’m sure you have much to talk about. And be sure to tell Elaine that Hannah has some nasty scrapes that will need looking after. They didn’t seem to be healing as they should.” Richard walked with her to the door and waited there until she was safely back home. He waved, and turned to go inside when he was nearly bowled over by Eli.

“Sorry, Papa!” she picked herself up off the porch and retracted her wings. “Where’s Hannah?” She hurried into the kitchen without waiting for his answer.

“Hannah! Where did you go? What Happened? Why didn’t you wait for me?” she slid her chair up against Hannah’s and put her arms around her. Papa sat down and watched her carefully, still concerned about her previous behavior, even though she seemed almost like her old self now.

“I don’t know, Eli. I don’t know! I just...flew. I felt like I just had to fly, so I flew. But it wasn’t like my dream at all!”

“But...why didn’t you wait for me? We were going to fly together the first time, remember? And you...didn’t even wait. And you didn’t even talk to me. You just went away. You really went away.” She didn’t mean to sound angry, but she really was, she realized. How could Hannah have done this? Didn’t she know how frightened she would be? “Didn’t you hear me scream, Hannah? Didn’t you see Mama and Papa? How scared we all were?”

Hannah burst into tears, “I never wanted any of this, Eli. All I wanted was to be like you,” she sobbed. “I just wanted your wings, so I could fly with you, and look what’s happened! I’ve got strange wings that only work right in my dreams, and now I can lie to you and keep you from my thoughts, and now I have thoughts I really want to keep from you. And you’re mad at me! And your Mama will be mad at me too! I’ve made a mess of everything, and I don’t even know why!”

Eli heard the screen door slam on the back porch. “Eli, that’s enough! Can’t you see how upset you’re making her?” Mama stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. “How long have you

known Hannah now? And how often has she ever been selfish or inconsiderate? When has she ever put herself first over you OR Oskar? And, just for the record, I am fully aware of those times when you both put yourselves first, at her expense.” She took a closer look at Hannah, grabbed some towels and sat down beside her. She wiped the dirt off her face. “Turn around please, Hannah.” Hannah turned toward Eli, but couldn’t bear to look at her. Eli had never been mad at her before, nor had she ever had a reason to be, until now. She bowed her head and stared at her hands as Elaine carefully pulled the sweatshirt over her head, exposing her back.

She gasped, “Hannah, doesn’t that hurt?! Rich, her back is badly scratched! Hannah? Look at me!” Hannah turned around slowly. “My God, Hannah! You’re a mess! Your chest is as bad as your back! What happened?”

“Maggie brought her home, Elaine. She fell from God knows how high and hit the side of their house after leveling the bushes under the kitchen window.”

“Why didn’t you tell me Hannah?” Eli was mortified. Here she was, so mad at her she hadn’t even noticed the dirt on her face and in her hair.

“More importantly, why haven’t you begun healing, Hannah? If you can fly without Ejuice, why can’t you heal? Hannah?” Elaine took her face in her hands and lifted it up so Hannah was forced to look at her.

“I didn’t want to,” she whispered.

“I wasn’t aware it was a choice, Hannah. Talk to me.”

“I didn’t want to. So I didn’t.”

Rich and Elaine looked at each other. “Rich? Call Jack. And Jonathan. Get them over here. Call Livia too!”

“No! Please don’t! I don’t want Jack to know...”

“Rich?”

He stood up and reached for the phone.

“I’m healing! See? I’m healing now! I’ll be fine.” She stood up, held her arms out and turned around. After the fourth turn, she was healed completely. She sat down, pulled the sweatshirt back over her head and wrapped her arms around herself. “Please, don’t call anyone. Please, please...don’t. I promise I’m fine.” Her voice was soft and pleading.

Elaine took her hand. “Hannah? You fell. You fell a long way, judging by the scratches and bumps. You fell while you were flying. You were flying with impossible wings. Wings you grew without Ejuice. And you grew pointed ears as well.” She smiled at her. “What would you have us do?”

“Please, Mrs. Dawson...”

Elaine had to understand why Hannah was so upset, apart from having just fallen from the sky, and why she didn’t want anyone else to know what happened. Her strangeness seemed to be gone, but still... “I’ll tell you what. You choose: your mom and dad, Jack, or Jonathan? Richard will call whichever one you wish. But tomorrow morning, everyone will be told. It has to be that way, Hannah. Pick now, because afterwards, Mr. Dawson is going to go over you with a fine-toothed comb to make sure you’ve not broken anything.”

“Eli? What should I do?”

“First, you have to forgive me for being such a jerk.” She put her arms around her. “Then, I think you should let Papa call Jack.”

“Not Jack, Eli! It would be too embarrassing! He’ll really be disappointed in me for acting like a stupid child, and ruining everything!”

She’s ashamed of herself for not behaving like an adult! Elaine breathed a sigh of relief.

“No he won’t Hannah. He knows how you think better than anyone. Call Jack, Papa.”

“It’s Hannah’s choice, Eli. Hannah, whom would you like Mr. Dawson to call?”

“Eli’s right, Mrs. Dawson. I want Jack.” She smiled gratefully at Eli. “I’m so sorry I hurt your feelings, Eli. I really wasn’t ... thinking about that. In fact, I really wasn’t thinking like that at all. I was thinking about what being a fairy would really be like, and then I was one. And all the rest of you...weren’t. And, somehow, you frightened me.”

“Richard? Call Jack right away. Hannah, I want you upstairs in bed right now. And you’ll stay there until Mr. Dawson is done with you, and Jack has had a chance to talk to you. Understood?”

“Yes, Mrs. Dawson.” Eli took her arm and eased her out of her chair. “I’m not an invalid, Eli.” But she was exceedingly happy that Eli had forgiven her and was no longer angry with her. She put her arm around Eli’s waist and let her help her up the stairs.

Eli helped her clean up and get into her pajamas, then climbed into bed with her. For some reason, she couldn’t stop touching her, holding her, and ... adjusting her clothes, hair, and blanket over and over again.

“Eli, what are you doing? You’re treating me like I’m your doll or something.”

“I haven’t had a doll for over 100 years, Hannah. Only a bunny. I’m treating you like my bunny.” She grinned at her. “But I can’t help it. You were such a cute fairy.” She pinched her cheek.

Hannah smiled in spite of herself.

§

Papa had finally given her a clean bill of health by the time Jack arrived. Hannah was still nervous, but Eli's doting on her and her repeated apologies had definitely made her feel a bit better about everything. All the same, she squeezed Eli's hand when she heard him coming up the stairs with Mrs. Dawson.

He peeked around the corner. "Well, hello there, beautiful! I hear your first solo flight was a bit of a bust. But that's what you get for forgetting to file a flight plan."

Hannah smiled at him. "I promise I'll never make that mistake again, Jack. I don't think I'm cut out for flying anyway."

He sat down on the bed. "Nonsense! The only mistake you made was deciding to take your first flight in an experimental aircraft."

"I guess that's right huh?" she grinned at him.

"It must have been frightening for you when you realized you couldn't control your wings properly. How high were you when you fell, Hannah?" he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Really high, Jack. And when it...happened, I was terrified. I just knew I was going to die. And I knew it was all my fault because I hadn't listened to Eli's Papa. Or to Eli." Once again, she fought back her tears. She absolutely was not going to cry in front of Jack. "I looked for Eli when I was falling, but I didn't see her anywhere. I was afraid she was so angry with me that she hadn't come after me after all. And then when I saw I was going to hit your house I was even more frightened, because I was afraid I'd hurt your mom." Jack could feel her trembling.

"But you didn't, Hannah. You only hurt yourself." He kissed her on the cheek. "You're an amazing young woman, you know. If I were falling out of the sky toward certain death, I'm not sure I would be worrying much about who I was going to land on. Unless, perhaps, if it were you." Hannah turned bright red.

"Did our retired fairy pass your inspection, Dr. Dawson?"

"With flying colors, Jack. She seems as good as new."

"Good! So now we can get down to business. Hannah? Would you please grow your ears for me?"

"What?! You want me to..."

"As a matter of fact, yes. But only if you're up to it emotionally. I have every confidence that you're up to it physically, because I trust your doctor."

“But I don’t know if I can, Jack...” she closed her eyes and concentrated.

Eli laughed, “Then they’re doing it on their own, Hannah. Look, Mama!”

“May I touch them, Hannah?” Jack grinned at her.

She leaned toward him and lightly pressed her forehead against his chest. He reached up and gingerly ran his fingers along the edge of her left ear. He massaged it carefully, tracing the shape of the cartilage beneath the skin, and then checked the symmetry with the right ear.

Hannah sighed softly. “Now I know how Einstein feels when I rub his ears.”

Jack laughed. “Hannah, I can’t concentrate when you’re being so adorable.” He stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t worry, though; I won’t ask you to grow the wings – tonight. You can put away your ears now.”

“What if I want to keep them?” She put her hands on her hips and stared up at him defiantly.

“Only if you bring them downstairs with you and have something to eat. I’ll wager that you’re starving about now.”

Jack was right, Hannah realized. She was starving to death. “Okay! It’s a deal. Let’s go, Eli.” She wiggled her ears at her.

“All that expended energy had to come from somewhere,” Jack explained to Elaine as the girls rushed down the stairs. “If not from Ejuice, then where? I have a hunch the Sandstrøm’s monthly grocery bill is going to increase significantly; another very interesting development, I might add.”

“Any conclusions regarding the ears?” Richard asked.

“They’re almost real. What I mean by that is they’re not just shaped right, they’re structured right – sort of. The underlying cartilage, complete with the Helix, Scapha, Antihelix, and Antihelical fold, is proportionally distorted to accommodate the new elfin shape, but is nothing like the pointed ear structure of some of our simian ancestors like the Macaque, where the tip is more elongated like some cats or dogs, but the fundamental outer-ear platform remains the same.”

“What does that mean, Jack?” Elaine was lost at the first helix.

“It means they’re more likely contrived than the result of evolutionary forces. In other words, Hannah may have ‘made them up’ from her own ideas of what a fairy’s ears should look like.”

“You mean, she ‘imagined’ them? They aren’t part of the evolved template the parasite uses to grow our wings, claws and fangs?”

“It’s just my guess, of course, but that’s sure the way it looks to me right now. And if it’s true just think of the implications of it all. And those wings! It’s a miracle she was able to fly with those wings at all if she just conjured them up from an artist’s idea of what a fairy’s wings should look like.”

“But...why? Why is she different? She had the same injection as the rest of us.” Elaine started quickly down the stairs as soon as she heard the banging of pots and pans in the kitchen. Jack and Richard followed close behind.

“The only clue we have so far is her loss of immunity, Elaine. Jonathan and Jack are still trying to figure out how and when that happened – and why.”

“And the night is young, Dr. Dawson. Jonathan and I have a great deal more to do before tomorrow morning. Hannah’s ears have actually pointed me in another direction; the correct one, I’m guessing.” Jack could just barely contain his excitement.

§

Eli and Hannah had finally fallen asleep, when the phone rang. Eli rolled over and reached for it, but was too late; someone else had picked it up. She lay there on her back for a few minutes, debating whether or not she should ask Papa who it was, then decided against it, took a handful of chips from the bowl Hannah had insisted on bringing upstairs with her, stuffed them in her mouth and lay back down, hands behind her head. She glanced over at Hannah and was surprised to see that, even asleep, she still had her fairy ears. It actually worried her a bit, since sleep had always marked the withdrawal of her own her claws and fangs. Hannah was clearly different...

§

Again, the phone rang. Eli reached for it, hesitated, waited until it was picked up, then carefully picked it up herself. She glanced at her clock: 3:00AM. And she was feeling a bit curious. And feisty.

“Hello?” she recognized Papa’s sleepy voice.

“Dr. Dawson? Sava here. I’m just calling as per our agreement. I’m planning on dispatching someone tonight.”

“Eli? Are you on the line?”

“Yes, Papa. Hi, Sava.”

“Hang up please, Eli.”

“Okay, Papa. Bye Sava.”

“Goodnight, Angel.”

Eli reluctantly hung up the phone. *Angel?* She smiled to herself. That had not been the response she had expected, but it made her feel good all the same. She had never forgotten that he had helped watch over her all those years. She was glad that he hadn’t forgotten either.

“Who are you planning on murdering this time, Sava? Does this have anything to do with your encounter earlier this evening with Ryan and his friend?”

“Ah! So he did call. Good for him! You’ve found a good one there, Doctor. And I can personally vouch for his friend also. Cool under stress, well-mannered, and quite strong-willed. I was impressed. You can trust her completely.”

“And you got all that from one brief encounter?”

“Of course, Doctor. You know Eli well, so you must understand our methods by now. They’re infallible.”

“Nothing’s infallible, Sava. Especially your justifications for murder. Exactly why do you feel you have to kill this man?”

“Because he can’t know of my existence, and by inference, the origins of both Eli and Elaine; a piece of the puzzle his organization will easily put in its proper place, once brought to their attention.”

“What organization?”

“The Builderbriar Club of course.”

“Why on earth would a group of millionaires, retired bankers, and ex-heads of state care about who or what you are?”

“Because my very existence and the existence of others of my kind -- and yours too now, Doctor -- are a direct threat to their goals of world domination through economic control. And they already know about you, or at least enough about you and yours to pique their interest.”

“And why do we pose any threat to them at all?” Dawson was beginning to doubt Sava’s cognitive skills at this point. He couldn’t believe Sava had bought into this ridiculous conspiracy theory.

“Give it a little thought, Doctor, and you’ll understand. You yourself have discussed the effects that immortality, superhuman-strength, immunity from all known diseases, tolerance for extreme variations in heat and cold, and the ability to fly, would have on human society. What effects can you imagine these things would have on the economic stability of the world? The home heating and cooling industries as well as the energy industries world-wide, would be severely impacted. Automobile sales would drop off precipitously, especially in areas with dry climates. Hospitals

and virtually all medical care facilities, except perhaps for those treating amputees or people with extremely severe brain injuries, would suffer extreme economic losses. The Club would also lose their effective control of the corporate media and their control of many countries' borders that they use to control the flow of information as well as goods and services, especially if Oskar's telepathic abilities can be bred into humanity.

"Take all this, coupled with the group's deep underlying conviction that man is intrinsically evil, and the prognosis for us if we attract their attention, is not good."

"If this is all true, why haven't you warned us before?"

"Because, Doctor, we weren't really on their radar until the religious nut sold his story to that rag, and then tried to take out the children. They must have more specific information too, or else why would they have targeted Ryan? He knows almost nothing about your history and your involvement with Genterapi and Archaeogenetics. But he is an eye-witness to your strength and flying abilities. How could they have known this? No, I have to dispose of this man. He knows too much. My involvement in their encounter with him, though necessary for Ryan's safety, is his death warrant."

"Murder is never the answer, Sava."

"Is that all you have, Doctor? If so..."

"Have you talked to him? Has he told you anything?"

"He's told me everything, Doctor. How could he not, once he knew what I was? I promise you, his death will be painless and unexpected. He won't suffer. And he'll never be found."

Dawson sighed. He knew there was nothing he could say that would change Sava's mind. Their worlds were too different. There was no common ground on which he could argue his case.

"Sava, I'm setting up a meeting at Archaeogenetics for the day after tomorrow. I expect you to be there. Will 8:30 PM be satisfactory?"

"I'll be there, Doctor. How is Hannah doing, by the way?"

"She's fine, Sava. As is Eli." *How odd! He knows nothing of what's happened. Why would he be interested in how she's doing? Unless...*

"Good! We'll talk Thursday evening then. Goodby."

He rolled over next to Elaine, decided against waking her up, and kissed her on the cheek. They had much to talk about in the morning, with and without the children present.

Chapter 31: Sava's story

“Okay, Jonathan. What have you and Jack found?”

“Hannah, like the rest of you, has had regular blood tests, since her injection. We have verified that she was immune the day after Eli was shot, when we were all given blood tests. Within just four days, she was no longer immune.”

“Well that certainly narrows it down. But what could have happened in just four days that would wipe out her immunity?” Elaine thought about those four days carefully. “Where was Hannah during that time, Livia?”

“Mostly at your house, Elaine. As usual” she smiled at her.

“Was she ever alone, Elaine?” Nils asked.

“Not here, Nils. How about at your house?”

“Nope! If we weren't there, Jason was. And at night, Einstein is always in her room.”

“How about at your house? Did she sleep alone at night, Elaine? Perhaps if Eli and Oskar slept together?”

Elaine smiled. “No Livia. When Hannah's here they ALL sleep together, as they always have.” She was thankful that this topic had been thoroughly discussed before with both of them, or else it could certainly complicate things now.

“Then...what? Did anything out of the ordinary happen during those four days.”

Elaine looked at Rich. “Sava! I told you his visit at that particular time was strange, especially since you got no concessions from him at all!”

“But you told us he left after talking with you for only a few minutes, Richard.”

“He did, Nils. He was never alone with any of the children, and in fact, never even touched them.”

“But you invited him in, Rich. And you know what that means!” Elaine stood up abruptly.

“It means he could come back whenever he wished and enter without further permission.” Richard said, quietly. “Thank you, Elaine, for strengthening my own suspicions.”

“If you suspected it, why didn't you come right out and say it, rather than making us all waste our time like this?”

“Because I don’t like the man’s ideas or his methods, and wanted to make sure that more objective minds than mine would come to the same conclusions I did. As you have.”

“But what could he have done to her, Richard? And why? Isn’t he on our side?”

“He is, Livia, but he is an independent thinker and has been one for hundreds of years. And I’m beginning to think he has an agenda of his own – or Gudmund’s. When he called last night, he asked me specifically how Hannah was doing. That’s when I became suspicious.”

“But that’s not all we found, Dr. Dawson.” Jack handed him a DNA sequencing chart. “The junk DNA template indicator for the success of the vaccination is gone, as we knew, but the template for the proper ‘Vampiric’ traits has been corrupted too. It was a bit open-ended before; at least enough to where both Elaine, and Eli to a certain degree, could expand on their metamorphosis, but with Hannah it’s even more open-ended.”

“What do you mean, Jack?”

“Elaine and Eli can expand the range of light visible to them outside the boundaries of the template, and Elaine has been able to change the shape of her claws, with limitations of course. The rigidity and firm boundaries of the template limits them. With Hannah, the template has become more of a ‘suggestion’ than a mandate. It’s still there, but a full step lower on the hierarchy. Her own mind, together with the weak neural network, has a significantly stronger influence on her metamorphosis than the template; an extremely dangerous development, which was made abundantly clear last night. She could have died as a result of her crude attempt at flying.”

“But Hannah isn’t a biologist, or a zoologist. How could she have known enough to construct those wings? They weren’t perfect, perhaps, but certainly good enough for her to fly out the window and across the street. That’s no small feat in itself.”

“Think of it this way, Doctor. The process of evolution has left a very long trail of junk DNA strands, or breadcrumbs, from virtually every backwards-pointing node on the family tree, linking us to virtually every species that ever existed that played any small part in producing our particular maze of branches, all the way back to the one-celled creatures from which all life on Earth has evolved. Somewhere in that vast junkyard were parts of a template for bat, bird, butterfly or some other insect’s wings, or perhaps different parts of several different ones, which the weak neural network cobbled together in order to satisfy Hannah’s will. Remember, it’s actually now an extension of her own brain. And they almost worked. Not so much of a miracle when you think of it that way.”

“You’re right of course, Jack. And the ears didn’t have to be perfect. Their shape is non-critical, so she got away with it.”

“And continues to get away with it, I see. Good morning, Hannah.” Elaine got up and reached for the teapot.

“Hannah! Come sit with me.” Jack patted the chair next to him and Papa slid her cup over.

Hannah slid into the chair and put her arm through his.

“Don’t get too comfortable though. You’re going to put on a show for us.”

“What, Jack? What do you want me to do?”

He smiled at her. “For starters, I want you to grow wings for us.”

“But they don’t work right, Jack. What’s the point?”

“You’re going to grow different wings this time, Hannah. Wings that have millions of years of evolution behind them, rather than wings painted on the wall of a mysterious white building on a mysterious island.”

“But I can’t, Jack! Eli and I tried before and I couldn’t.”

“That was only because you didn’t want to, Hannah. At least that’s my theory. And you are going to test it for me.”

Eli and Oskar stumbled down the stairs and into their chairs. “How long have you been down here, Hannah?” Eli dropped a couple sugar cubes in her tea and stirred it slowly.

“I just got here, Eli. And already, Jack wants me to grow wings.”

“Told ya!” Oskar grinned.

“Am I really that predictable, Oskar?”

“We took a vote and it was two to one, Jack. Hannah’s already put on Eli’s white suit.”

“Well, then! Why don’t we get right to it while Elaine fixes Hannah a big breakfast?”

Hannah looked at Livia questioningly. “Mom? Dad? Can I...”

“Of course, Hannah.” Nils smiled at her. Actually, he couldn’t wait, he realized.

Hannah took off her shirt and stood quietly, arms at her sides. “What do I do now, Jack?”

“Hannah, all the puzzle pieces are there in your mind. You don’t need to think beautiful thoughts. You don’t need fairy dust. You just need to put the pieces together...”

Hannah closed her eyes, and imagined Eli’s wings as she had seen them the night before. She searched for the memories and felt her old mind expanding into her new one, and finally across the table and effortlessly into the mind of...Elias. Daytime faded into night as, in her mind’s eye,

she was standing with him on the edge of a cliff in the darkness, watching the bats flying past her. Her head buzzed with their high-pitched squeaks as they darted back and forth, flying in and out of small clouds of insects, finally disappearing behind a rock outcropping. She leaned out over the cliff, raised her arms slowly over her head, and...

"There now! I knew you could do it, Hannah!" Jack was delighted. "Now hold still while I take a few measurements. Dr. Dawson? Could you give me a hand?"

"Hannah opened her eyes, smiled at Jack, then turned toward Eli. "Sorry, Eli. I think I cheated a bit." She kept her arms over her head, exploring the strange new feeling extending out to the tips of her new...fingers.

"It's okay, Hannah. That was the first time I ever flew, you know," she said, softly.

"Then I guess these are your first wings, huh?" She hesitated. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"I said it was okay, Hannah. I'm not...that anymore. And I wasn't quite 'that' then, either. At least not for a few more minutes." She shuddered in spite of herself. "I was still...like you."

"Confused and a bit frightened?" but Hannah knew what she had really meant.

"Not just a bit Hannah; I was terrified."

Hannah giggled as Jack and Richard poked and prodded her new wings. "Wow, does that tickle, Jack! Sorry, Eli."

"Yeah, they're really sensitive, Hannah. And completely off-limits to Oskar. He tried it...once."

"And it won't be the last time, Eli," Oskar said defiantly.

"I want you to remember these wings, Hannah. Feel them in your mind and take note of every facet of them, every sense of them that you can feel. They're perfect, and you need to 'lock them in' for want of a better phrase. Believe me, this is ultimately going to be much harder for you than for Eli."

"But why, Jack?"

"It's a long story, Hannah." Jack broke the news to her as gently as he could, and resisted his strong urges to keep his fears and misgivings to himself. But even after he was finished, he knew she really hadn't gotten it. By the frightened look on Eli's face, he was sure she, at least, had.

He summed up: "What this all means, Hannah, is that you have to ultimately trust only those metamorphoses that have stood the test of natural selection over the eons. No imaginary wings or any other body parts that don't have the Vampire 'seal of approval,' particularly if changing them could endanger your life." Hannah rolled her eyes. "Do you understand what I'm telling you, Hannah?"

Hannah flashed him an elfish grin. “I do, Jack. I really do! But what if I...”

Jack jumped back, as suddenly the black velvet in her wings flowed and swirled as though someone were mixing paint in a can. It continued slowly and purposefully until her wings were pure white.

“Does this count, Jack?”

His face flushed. *Doesn't she understand the seriousness of this? She might have killed herself last night! And it would have been my fault.*

“I do understand, Jack. But I assure you, I never make the same mistake twice. Ask Dad.” She leveled her gaze at him for a moment, “And it wouldn't have been your fault; it would have been mine. I'm old enough now to pay the price for my mistakes. I was upset with myself because I have no excuse for making others pay the price for them.” She grinned at Eli and spun around a couple of times. “Aren't they beautiful, Eli? I like white. And the wings still have the Vampire 'seal of approval,' Jack.”

Jack sighed, “Hannah, you're going to be the death of me. Think like a scientist. How do you know what that color change might have done to the strength of the intricate carbon-based structure of your wings?”

“You mean the C₆₀ molecules? The ones that look like tiny soccer balls? Eli told me all about them, and I read up on them long before I got my wings. I haven't touched them, Jack. I promise.” She wiggled her white wings at him. “Go ahead! Hit me! I can take it!”

Jack stood there with his mouth open. Hannah clearly wasn't a little girl any more. He needed to rethink his over-protectiveness. The last thing he wanted to do was patronize her.

The grin on her face clearly indicated that she had heard his thoughts. “Hannah, please...”

“You're right, Jack. I promise I won't do it anymore. But it's just so much fun! I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, Hannah. Just don't make a habit of it. Someday you may not like what you hear.” For a while now, he realized, Hannah had stopped being just a child to him. But now she was rapidly becoming an enigma. She startled him sometimes, especially when she, with seemingly little effort, thought outside the box – a far more frequent occurrence than it used to be.

Finally, he put away his tape measure, and closed his notebook.

“Come fly with me, Hannah!” Eli took her hand and headed for the back door.

“No!” Jack couldn't help himself, in spite of his new resolve. “Not until we understand what's happened to you, Hannah. And why. I won't have you risking your life again.”

“Jack’s right, Eli. We have to wait.” She hesitated, then stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. *Jack, I really really...trust you, you know. More than anyone else in the world.*

Jack couldn’t think of a thing to say. He knew her trust was misplaced, but the powerful heart-felt warmth and love that accompanied her thoughts suddenly made him feel like a little boy again, when things were so much more magical and every day was a new adventure, just like it had been that day so long ago when he had first met and fallen madly in love with Eli. And he suddenly couldn’t begin to imagine how his world could have nearly as much meaning without Hannah and Eli in it.

What was that?! He thought to himself.

§

Eli was first at the door when the bell rang. “Come in, Sava! Everyone’s waiting for you in the dining room. I’ll be upstairs if you need me.” Her eyes sparkled as she took his hand briefly, then she turned and quickly disappeared up the stairs.

They were all there when he stepped into the dining room. He stood there a moment surveying the solemn faces, then broke into a wide grin. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was about to be ambushed.”

“Well, we do have some issues we need to discuss with you, Sava. Especially since there is evidence that you may have crossed the line and, consequently, put Hannah’s life in danger.” Dawson was in no mood for Sava’s games.

“That could never happen, Doctor.” Sava sat down at the head of the table, the only vacant seat – by design, he was now certain.

“But it has happened, Sava. Hannah was almost killed two nights ago as a direct result of your interference.”

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me when I called?”

“Because you were the prime suspect.”

Sava leaned back in his chair, arms folded against his chest. “Go on, Doctor. I’m listening.”

“You entered our home, uninvited, I might add, probably on the same evening you stopped by, on the pretext of making peace with us over a...disagreement. You invaded our home, you violated our trust, and you violated Hannah.” His voice hardened. “That’s unacceptable to all of us. First, we need your unconditional assurance that nothing of this kind will ever happen again, and second, we demand a complete explanation as to what was done to her and why.” He watched Sava carefully. He was fairly sure Sava wouldn’t lie to them. It simply didn’t seem to be in his nature.

Sava hesitated a moment. “First, I would like you to fill me in on Hannah’s...situation.”

“No, Sava. We need your commitment first.”

“Okay, Doctor. You have it. I’ll bow to your authority on this. No further unauthorized invasions of your home.”

“And?” Jack was determined that there would be no ambiguity whatsoever. This man simply had to be kept under control.

“I wasn’t finished, Jack.” Sava smiled at him. “I will also defer to your authority on everything affecting you, your families and your friends, with the one exception I have discussed privately with you, Doctor.”

“Does this satisfy everyone?” Dr. Dawson looked directly at Livia. “Do you have anything you would like to add, Livia?”

“I want to hear his explanation, before he gets anything else from us.” she said, stony-faced. “And it better be a damned good one.”

“Do you remember, Doctor, the notebooks that Jonathan left for you in the bank vault?”

“Of course, Sava. What about them?”

“Then I’m sure you recall the three light-blue ones with Hannah’s name on them.”

“I do. The first time the Archaeogenetics Logo appears that I’m aware of.”

“You’ve always been under the impression that the logo was the result of Gudmund discovering Hannah’s genetic uniqueness. You’re wrong.”

“Enlighten us then, Sava.” Elaine was getting impatient, “And without the theatrics.”

“The logo was the result of a singular vision of Gudmund’s, and his resulting epiphany. Hannah’s uniqueness was a small part of it, but only the catalyst.” He stood up, pushed his chair back, and began pacing back and forth.

“Doctor, you have to understand. Gudmund had a classic upbringing before the darkness took over his father and destroyed his life. Science was in its infancy, and religious superstition permeated our lives, directed our fate and destroyed with a vengeance those who presumed to violate its teachings. That was why he came to me one night in a state of great excitement, telling me he had had a vision; a vision of the future that, unlike his normal visions, had the crystal-clarity of Truth about it. A perfect Stable Future. And Hannah was in the very center of it.” He stopped pacing, and put his hands firmly on Elaine’s shoulders. Dr. Dawson, sitting directly across from her, watched him carefully for any sign of deceit.

“In his ‘vision,’ he saw Hannah, framed in a large window with nothing but deep blackness behind her, with the very wings he enthusiastically incorporated into the company logo within a week. And he saw...other things. His vision became even clearer, and his essence actually passed into her body itself. He saw the blood flowing in her arteries, he saw the flotsam and jetsam in her veins, even on the molecular level, and he saw myriad structures in her blood and tissue he could now recognize as various unique DNA sequences and antibodies, largely due to his comparatively recent obsessions with a cure for Eli and the resulting concentrated self-education regimen he forced himself to pursue, with the help of Jonathan, of course. And, Doctor, Gudmund had a photographic memory.

“Finally and more importantly, he saw the changes in her mind; in her very way of thinking, directed by her own perception of what she was feeling and what she so desperately wanted to be. In short, he saw her deliberately and systematically changing the basic way she thought, and her very perspective and her intellect suddenly became...not human. More than human. He was convinced that she was evolving, before his very eyes.”

“When the vision came to an abrupt end, he had great difficulty understanding what he had seen and felt. It was as though the old world he had been born into, and the new one he was having difficulty embracing, were struggling for dominance in his mind. Ultimately, the old world won, but the concession he made to the new one was characterized by his obsessive determination to duplicate what he had seen flowing through her veins. He was convinced that he had seen the future of mankind in Hannah, the ultimate triumph of man over his primeval origins, the ability for us to dispose of all the dark evolutionary baggage that was necessary for mankind to survive in the jungle, but whose very presence in a civilized and advanced society was now becoming a threat to our very existence.”

“For the first time since man rose up out of the darkness of ignorance and saw the bare beginnings of the Light, he could finally be in complete control of his own destiny. Imagine what we could become if we were limited only by our own imaginations!” He started pacing again. “He viewed Hannah as the ‘seed’ of mankind’s best hope for the future.”

“This happened shortly before Hannah’s tenth birthday. And for the next two years, he worked to reproduce what he had seen. And when he saw that you, doctor, were about to find the cure, he immediately recognized the DNA strand you had isolated as being the final link in the process. It was then he realized that it was his destiny to be the final cog in the mysterious machinery that had brought Hannah to that mysterious place, standing in front of that dark window, the ‘Eve’ of the rebirth of mankind. All of her progeny would be super-human, born without the darkness that has plagued mankind for eons, and held him back from his destiny.”

Richard looked at Elaine, and saw his own fears mirrored in her face. “But what did you do to her, Sava?”

“No more than what you’ve done to everyone in this room but me. I gave her an injection.”

“What?! An injection of what, exactly?” Both Elaine and Richard were on their feet now.

“Haven’t you heard anything I’ve told you? I gave her the injection which will someday allow her to fulfill her destiny as revealed in Gudmund’s vision.”

Without a word, Jack threw his chair aside, cocked his arm back, and before Sava could react, swung hard, connecting solidly with the side of his head. “You bloody arrogant bastard! Do you realize what you’ve done?!” Sava sprawled across the floor, rolled over, and tried to get to his feet, but Jack kicked him hard in the ribs, slamming him against the wall.

§

Upstairs, Hannah’s head jerked to the side as though she’d been slapped. “Eli! It’s Jack!! He’s...”

“I know, Hannah!” Oskar grabbed her arm and the three of them rushed for the door.

Chapter 32: By His Bootstraps

Sava jumped to his feet, golden eyes blazing. “Back off, or I’ll...”

“You’ll what? Overpower me with your pre-Victorian intellect? Awe me with your superior historic perspective? Or just squash me like a bug!”

“Jack, stop it!” Richard grabbed his arm. Elaine rushed over and stood between them.

Jack jerked his arm away, brushed past Elaine and lunged for Sava, but he was brought up short by three pairs of eyes staring at him uncomprehendingly from the stairway.

He saw the frightened look on their faces, stumbled back to his chair, righted it and sat down heavily, holding his head in his hands. Sava brushed himself off and sat down stiffly in his chair, palms flat on the table in front of him, avoiding Eli’s eyes.

Hannah moved up quietly behind Jack and put her arms around his neck. “Jack, please! Don’t be upset. He meant no harm. He didn’t know. He did this with the best of intentions.”

“He did, Jack. I know it!” Eli took Sava’s hand and wrapped her delicate fingers through his massive calloused ones, and squeezed tightly. Sava looked up into her eyes for a moment, then down at the table. Livia was surprised to see his eyes glistening.

“Gudmund shared his vision with you, Sava?” Richard was determined to get the conversation back on track.

Sava nodded. “He did, Doctor. And it was a most powerful one.”

“Then, I’d like you to come with me.” He headed for the stairs. “Hannah? Will you please join us? The rest of you, please stay here. You too, Jack.”

Richard led him upstairs into Eli’s room. “Sava, do you recognize the window? Is it the one in Gudmund’s vision?”

“It...could be, Doctor. I’m not sure. Even if it is, it just means that Hannah’s transformation will occur here in your own home. You should feel honored to be a part of the new beginning.”

“It’s already happened, Sava; with near-disastrous results. Ironically, Gudmund misinterpreted what he saw. As have you.”

“Educate me then, Doctor.”

“I’ll leave that to Hannah. Would you care to share your great ‘evolutionary leap’ with Sava, Hannah?”

Hannah complied. When it was over, Sava sat down hard on the bed. “It was merely a child’s fantasy? How could we have gotten it so wrong?” He could still feel the agony of her failure; the unfamiliar fear of falling out of the sky; the fear of death – a far cry from the feeling of exaltation both he and Gudmund had imagined.

Hannah looked down at her feet, ashamed.

“No, Sava. It was much more than that to Hannah. And if you had taken the time to get to know her, you’d understand. But even if she shared your vision, what she could become, as you so aptly put it yourself, is limited by her own imagination. Not by yours, not by mine, but by her own. And how different do you feel her vision for the future would be from that of Gudmund’s father, were he to have received this inoculation? She’s a rare child; an exceptional child, but she’s not a god. Did that not occur to you over that two-year period during which you indulged yourselves in your own childish fantasies?”

“No, Doctor. I must confess, it did not.”

Sava appeared stony-faced, but Dawson knew him well enough to know the wheels were turning, most likely at a very high rate of speed. “What did the two of you think would direct this magical process by which Hannah would save mankind from itself? Her own 14-year-old brain? Or some mysterious, benign guiding force that has access to some imagined Truth that has eluded philosophers since before Plato?”

“You’ve made your point, Doctor. You’re right. I’ve made an egregious error.” He took Hannah’s hand. “Can you ever forgive me, child?”

“For what, Sava? You’ve done nothing wrong.” She squeezed his hand. “You just did what you knew in your heart was the right thing to do.”

Sava stared at her, confused. “You should be angry, at least. I’ve made irreversible changes to your body, no matter the good intentions.”

“It’s too much trouble, Sava. I won’t do it. What’s done is done. Mr. Dawson and Jack will fix it.” She smiled at him.

“Are you really so sure she’s not our ‘Eve’ after all, Dr. Dawson?” He turned and headed down the stairs.

§

“What do you think they’re doing up there, Oskar?”

“I think Dad is giving Sava the business, Eli, but I’ll check if you’d like.”

“No. He’ll tell us if he wants us to know.” She sat down next to Jack. “Is there anything you can do for Hannah, Jack?”

“I honestly don’t know, Eli. But I seriously doubt it. It could take years to figure out what’s changed, and I’m sure Sava won’t be able to help us much. He was just the delivery boy.” He began clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Please don’t, Jack.” She put her hands over his. “Hannah will be fine. I just know it. We’ve talked.”

“No offence, Eli, but Hannah has difficulty seeing the downside of any situation.”

“Yeah, she does doesn’t she? That’s one reason why I like her so much.” Oskar grinned at him.

“Me too, Oskar. Me too.” Jack said, softly.

There is one thing that puzzles me, Jack.” Elaine glanced toward the stairs, then whispered, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I got the distinct impression that the active ingredients in this injection were copied from Gudmund’s vision of the future in which he literally swam through Hannah’s blood and tissue.”

“Close enough, Elaine.”

“Then...” she stopped talking when she heard Sava, Hannah, and Richard coming down the stairs.

They hadn’t settled into their chairs before Jonathan began talking. “I just want you to know, Doctor, that I knew nothing of this. I know I’ve made some errors in judgment lately, but I would never have ...”

“Relax, Jonathan. Sava has already assured me that your father acted without your knowledge. But there is a small lab run by Genterapi that you will certainly want to bring under your direct control. He’ll give you the details later.”

“Jack, the Doctor has convinced me that my actions were based on...faulty logic, and consequently I offer my heart-felt apology to Hannah, and all the rest of you for what I have done.”

“A bit too late for my taste, Sava,” Jack said angrily. “The irreversible damage has been done. And what assurance do we have that your arrogance won’t cause us problems in the future? Such as your ‘agreement to disagree’ with Dr. Dawson?”

“Other than my word, none at all, Jack. If that’s a problem for you, I can just withdraw myself permanently from these activities in the future. I’ll let it be your choice and yours alone.”

“I’m not sure why you think my vote should carry any more weight than anyone else’s, but I’ll call your bluff, Sava. Give up your agreement with Dr. Dawson, and you can stay. Otherwise...”

“Done, Jack! Ultimately, it’s just not that important to me anymore. I find the good Doctor here to be quite wise enough to rule our little group of pioneers. Especially when he has Elaine nearby to loan him a little extra backbone when he needs it. Eli? You look like something’s bothering you.”

“What agreement Sava? What did you and Papa agree to?”

Sava looked at Dr. Dawson, questioningly.

Dawson hesitated. “Eli, I think there are some things we shouldn’t discuss here. But I promise you, you will know at a more appropriate time.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Anything else, Eli?”

“No, Sava.” She smiled at him. “I...I’m glad you’re staying.”

“I am too, Eli.” He turned to the others. “Now we need to discuss the Builderbriar Club.”

“Not tonight, Sava, unless something significant has occurred.”

“If not tonight, then when? I have some serious concerns. And I think we may need to leave sooner than we expected.”

“We’ll all get together this weekend, Sava. Jonathan will let you know the time. The place will be right here.”

“Good. I’ll be on my way then.” Dr. Dawson and Eli walked him to the door. “Eli? Will you take care of Hannah and keep her safe for us?”

“I will, Sava. I promise.”

“Then I won’t worry.” He smiled at her, then quietly stepped out on the porch and closed the door behind him.

“Jack, I’m still interested in your take on the question I was posing to you when Sava arrived.”

“Refresh my memory, Elaine.”

“If the active ingredients in the injection were copied from Gudmund’s vision of Hannah’s future, who actually discovered them in the first place?”

Richard sat down next to her. “It is a logical dilemma, isn’t it? Hannah was injected with a concoction he saw in a vision of her future, which didn’t exist until he created it from his memory of what he saw in the future.”

“It’s a ‘predestination paradox,’ Dad,” Oskar volunteered.

Dawson grinned at him, “All that Heinlein you’ve been reading lately has paid off, I see. But I don’t think you’ve gotten it quite right. It’s more likely an ‘ontological paradox.’ Gudmund wanted this to happen and spent two years making sure it did. The loop was closed and a complex organic compound was invented out of thin air.”

“But it happened as a result of his journey into the future, Dad. He was the unwitting cause of the very effect he witnessed. The ontological paradox was a secondary effect.”

“What are you two talking about? As impressive as it sounds, it still sounds like pseudo-science to me.” Elaine frowned at them. “Or metaphysics.”

“It’s an attempt by people with way too much time on their hands to enumerate and define the paradoxes that could occur if time-travel were possible. What Gudmund did, although not time-travel per se, has clearly given rise to some of the same paradoxes. I believe Gudmund referred indirectly to this ‘cause-and-effect paradox,’ a corollary of the predestination paradox, as his ‘endless loop,’ in which knowing the future affects the present, which then affects the new future, ad infinitum. But I don’t think he recognized the possibility of an ontological paradox. Perhaps he hadn’t read Heinlein.” He winked at Oskar.

“In other words, the idea behind Gudmund’s ‘concoction’ came into existence spontaneously?” Elaine was incredulous. “Completely impossible!”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? But then, here we are. And I, for one, think this is a puzzle best kept to ourselves. Sava, with his old-world view, formed back when many thought that certain forms of life created themselves via Spontaneous Generation, might misinterpret this to mean that this idea was somehow divinely revealed to Gudmund. We can’t let that happen.” Jack took Hannah’s hand firmly in his own. “We simply can’t. He would be simply impossible to deal with. And even more dangerous than he still is.”

“I think you’re wrong, Jack. He’s really a pussycat. Eli has him wrapped around her little finger.” Hannah smiled at him and curled up in his lap.

And what’s left of him is wrapped around yours, Jack thought to himself.

Hannah giggled.

§

“Get the door, Ryan!”

“Get it yourself!” Disgusted, Ryan threw his guitar on the bed, jerked the door open and headed down the stairs, but not before he banged his fist on his brother’s door as he passed by.

“Knock it off, Ryan!”

The bell rang again. “I’m coming!” He jerked open the door.

“Good evening, Ryan. We need to talk.” Sava nodded toward the limo parked at the curb with the back door standing open. “There’s someone here who has something for you.” Janice smiled at him, and waved. He waved back.

“What are you doing here? Are you nuts? I haven’t told my family anything about you. Or about the other night. What am I supposed to tell them? Please, drive down to the end of the block. I’ll meet you there.” Without waiting for an answer, he slammed the door in his face.

“Who was it, Ryan?” His mom’s voice floated in from the kitchen.

“No one, Mom. Just someone handing out religious pamphlets.” He paused. “I think I’ll go out for a while. I’m bored.”

“Okay, Ryan. But don’t be too late. It’s still a school night, remember?”

“Yeah, Mom. I know.” He grabbed his jacket and slipped out the door.

He hurried up to the car and smiled as he slipped in next to Janice. “What are you doing here?”

“Well! I’m glad to see you too,” she teased. “Sava picked me up pretty much the same way he did you. Only I was reading on the front porch. I’m supposed to be at the library right now.” Sava pulled away from the curb and merged into traffic.

“Well, I wasn’t. I was upstairs in my room.” He leaned over the seat. “If my brother OR mother had answered the door instead of me, I would have had a lot of explaining to do. You scared the hell out of me!”

“But neither of them did, did they?” Sava smiled at him. “Relax. I know what I’m doing. I’ve been doing it for a very long time.”

“Why are we here, Sava?” Janice asked.

“Because you didn’t listen when your parents taught you not to get into a car with a stranger?”

Ryan and Janice looked at each other.

“Relax, both of you. I was just trying to make a point. The bottom line is; you both trust me. For the right reasons. And that’s a good thing.”

Ryan sat back against the plush seat and relaxed a bit. It was actually kind of exciting, and with Janice here too, it was even better. He glanced up and caught her grinning at him.

“As you know by now, Ryan, I work with Dr. Dawson and the rest of the ... ‘pioneers,’ for want of a better term. I wanted to get together with you both so you would be able to better understand what I have to tell you.”

Janice handed Ryan an envelope. “I almost forgot. Sava asked me to bring this along. It’s your drawing.”

“Whew! I recognized it, and thought you’d had enough of me.” He grinned at her.

“We’re really going to have to work on your self-esteem there, Ryan.”

“I don’t know how much he’s told you Janice, but you need to know the reason I had you bring the drawing.”

“Why? Is it worth something?”

“It is, Janice, but only because it’s a drawing of a real event.” He paused. “I can tell by the look on your face that Ryan hasn’t told you yet. But I can hardly blame him. As they say, ‘Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.’ That’s what I’m here for.”

“So you’re one of them?”

“Close enough, Ryan. At least, close enough to convince Janice.”

“One of who, Ryan?”

“Remember that story I told you? About the mother protecting her children? The story is true. All of it. Including the wings.”

As if on cue, Sava made a quick turn off the country road onto a rutted gravel path, drove in about 100 meters and pulled into a small clearing surrounded by thick foliage.

“Uh, I’m feeling a little uncomfortable right now.” Janice wondered for a moment if she had made a serious mistake.

“You’ve trusted me this far. Please give me a few more minutes, and all will be clear.” Sava stepped out of the car and into the glare of the headlights. He methodically removed his coat, then his tie, and finally his shirt, folding them neatly and placing them on the hood.

“Ryan, so help me God, if he takes anything else off, I’m outta here!”

Ryan squeezed her hand reassuringly. “He won’t. I know this must be hard for you, but just watch. This is really important.” He suddenly realized it was far more important to him than whatever Sava wanted to tell them. She simply had to share this secret with him. It was way too big for him to keep alone.

Sava put his arms at his sides, and in a single smooth movement, raised them aggressively over his head. His wings were there instantly, black and foreboding.

Janice gasped, hesitated a moment until her curiosity finally got the better of her, then got out of the car and approached him carefully. “How’d you do that? I didn’t see wires or anything when you took your shirt off. What an amazing trick! They look absolutely real.”

Ryan stayed in the car. As startled as he was at her reaction, he was even more amazed at her resilience. He remembered his first reaction to those wings, and was now determined he wasn’t going to tell her about it...unless she specifically asked, of course.

Sava smiled at her, and turned around slowly in the headlights. “See if you can figure it out, Janice.”

“May I...”

“Touch them? Of course.” Sava stood there patiently while she reached out and...”

She gasped, “They’re...alive! I can feel them moving with your heartbeat.” She backed away slowly. “And they...smell real.” The odor instantly reminded her of a small, frightened bat she and her mother had rescued from a badminton net in her back yard when she was little. Her mother had untangled it and let her hold it while she removed the last of the net from its wings, and finally released it. She had forgotten it completely...until now.

“And, just to remove any doubt...” Sava turned suddenly, leaped into the air and disappeared into the darkness, blowing Janice’s hair back around her face. She looked up, but saw nothing other than a vague shadow blocking out the stars as she followed the sound of his wings.

He landed lightly in front of her in the headlights, quickly retracted his wings and dressed himself slowly and purposefully, saying nothing, allowing it all to sink in. He knew how varied the responses could be, and felt she needed to digest it all at her own pace.

Feeling a bit unsteady, she braced herself against the open door and frowned as she saw Ryan’s ear-to-ear grin. “It’s not funny! He scared me to death!”

“It IS funny! You should have seen your face when you touched his wings.”

She slid in beside him and punched him hard on the arm. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me that the twins are separated by birth by over 200 years, too.”

“Yes, Janice, they are. I, myself, am over 300 years old.” Sava started the car and backed out onto the narrow path.

“And you haven’t retired yet? You must really love your job, whatever it is.”

Sava laughed. “You’ll do just fine! I knew it.” He pulled onto the main road and headed back towards the city. “Now, we have more serious things to discuss.”

As they drove aimlessly around the city, Sava slowly and carefully changed forever their view of the world around them. But always in the back of his mind, tempering his formerly comfortable arrogance with a new-found uncomfortable humility, was the cold, hard reality of the terrible mistake he had made and, more importantly, the line he had crossed with Hannah. And her graciousness after the fact had just driven the knife deeper.

Finally, he pulled up in front Janice’s house and turned off the headlights. “Any questions before we say ‘good night’?”

“I have one, Sava. Why haven’t we ever seen you in the daytime? Ryan has seen you twice before, and always at night. If you had wanted to meet and talk with us, it would have been safer for you to pick us both up right after school when no one else was at home at Ryan’s or at my house. Why didn’t you?” All she could think about was that smell. And its suggestion. And after everything he had told them so far, what she was thinking was only a small stretch further into the unknown, as well as an answer, however improbable, to the ultimate question: how Eli, Elaine, and Sava had been infected.

“Good observation, Janice. And what are your thoughts on the matter?”

“I think you’re a vampire.” She couldn’t believe she had actually said it. Thinking it was one thing; putting it out there was quite another.

“If that were true, wouldn’t you be in great peril right now?”

“Yes...no...I don’t know!”

“Relax, Janice. You have absolutely nothing to fear. Ryan? Any thoughts?”

He put his arm around Janice, protectively. “I think she’s right, Sava. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.” His head was swimming but, as impossible as it seemed, it really was the only thing that made any sense.

“And if it were true, would it change anything? Would you think less of Eli? Of Elaine? Or any of the others who befriended you and trusted you enough to let you into their lives?” Sava turned on the lights again and pulled away from the curb.

“...No, but I can’t help but think that it should.” *So why didn’t it?* Ryan couldn’t figure it out. The contrast between what he had seen in the field that day – all the love, kindness, and humanity -- with the darkness and evil associated with vampires, was irreconcilable to him. But it certainly explained the uneasiness he had felt since he first met Sava; the sense that he came from a much darker place than they. And, also in keeping with vampire lore, there was a sort of self-assuredness about him that seemed unchallengeable.

“To address your suspicions then: I am indeed a vampire. As were both Eli and Elaine at one time in their lives. I alone have chosen to remain one for reasons that are of no concern to you, and in fact, none of your business. If that’s an insurmountable problem for either of you, I will simply drop you off at home, no strings attached, and you will never see me again. You, Janice, will have no price to pay whatsoever. Ryan, of course, will lose all his newly-made friends but after all, two weeks ago he was blissfully unaware of their existence and was leading a perfectly happy life. He’ll get over it, I’m sure.” Once again, he pulled up to the curb in front of Janice’s house. “If you make that choice, however, I caution you strongly to keep absolutely quiet about everything you’ve seen and heard this evening, or the Club will most assuredly make your lives very difficult for you. At this point, you are merely ‘persons of interest’ to them. You must take care not to move further up on their list.”

“No!”

“What does that mean, Ryan?”

“I won’t give them up. And you probably saved our lives the other night. I don’t really care what you call yourself. And I WON’T give them up.”

“Janice?”

“What he said.”

“Good! I’m very relieved. Remember, you will be looked after from this point on by friends. You will know who they are when they deem it necessary. They will show you one of these.” He pulled out a small gold medallion, bearing the Archaeogenetics Logo. “Look at it carefully. Remember it. When you see it again, you can be absolutely sure you can trust the person bearing it.”

“Why, it’s Eli...or Hannah! I’d recognize her anywhere,” Ryan exclaimed.

“Actually, it’s Hannah. And you, Janice, will be meeting them all, quite possibly sooner than we had originally expected.”

§

Sava pulled up to the curb in front of Ryan’s house. Ryan looked at his watch: 10:15PM. “Sava? What would you have done if I had decided I couldn’t handle...what you are? You couldn’t have just left me alone. If I’m to believe you, your lives might be in danger because of what I’ve seen and heard.”

“But you didn’t.”

“But if I had?”

Sava smiled, reached across and opened his door for him. “Goodnight, Ryan.”

Chapter 33: The Pursuit

“Okay, Sava. What have you got for us?” Rich motioned to Elaine, who immediately climbed out of the pool, grabbed a towel and headed for the porch.

“Are you coming back, Mama?”

“After the meeting, Eli. I won’t be long.” She dried herself off, slipped on her sandals and sat down at the dining room table. Livia, Nils, Jonathan, and Jack were already seated.

“We’ve attracted their attention, Doctor. Their increased activity in Sunderland is a clear indication of this. So far, Ryan and Janice are merely being observed, but they know their man is missing there. It’s only a matter of time before they lose patience and become more...proactive. Jonathan has been good enough to provide the children with a bit of insurance, but they will be of little use if these people decide to take action.”

“But what real evidence do you have, Sava? This is all supposition.”

“There have been official inquiries at Genterapi by MHRA officials, and surprise inspections at several of our laboratories, also originating from there. There also have been inquiries about Archaeogenetics and our offshore facilities, including Phoenix Island.”

“Genterapi would naturally be of interest to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. After all, that’s the business we’re in, Sava.” Jonathan sounded puzzled. “But Archaeogenetics? We don’t produce any marketable drugs—and never will.”

“And Genterapi has dealt with them for years, Jonathan, as you know. This is a different group of people; not the usual bunch. We’ve always had a good relationship with them, but these new agents are more aggressive and much nosier.”

“Anything else, Sava?”

“I’ve saved the most interesting for last, Doctor. There have also been inquiries at the children’s school by the NSPCC and Child Protective Services with specific instructions to keep you out of the loop. Jonathan will confirm this. It was his contact at Scotland Yard who alerted us.”

“Jonathan?”

“I was only informed of this last week, Doctor, and with everything going on with Hannah, I forgot to mention it. My contact said he’d look into it more thoroughly, but I haven’t heard anything new. If it was of any significance, I’m sure he would have let me know by now.”

“I don’t like it, Rich. Jonathan? Is there any indication that they were singling anyone out specifically?” Elaine anxiously scanned the back yard, making sure all four of them were in sight.

“No, Elaine. But they apparently talked to teachers involved with all four of the children.”

“Now that worries me. Eli and Oskar? They’ve been in the system a relatively short time. I could almost understand their taking an interest in them. But when you throw Jason and Hannah into the mix, it makes me uncomfortable. The association isn’t obvious unless they’re looking for something specific. Only their friends would normally be that aware of their close relationship. Something’s going on, Rich.”

“We have our own people, Doctor. I’ll get them on this right away. In the meantime, I think we need to prepare ourselves for the move. Construction has already begun on the city, as you know. Many key employees have already moved their families into the first apartments and duplexes.”

“Why do you insist on calling it a ‘city,’ Jonathan? It’s a workers’ village at best, with the equivalent of a one-room schoolhouse and a general store at present. The total population will probably never be over 1,000 people.”

“It’s not the numbers that make a village or a city, Doctor. It’s the common goals and a sense of community. But most important of all, with the grand opening of the Phoenix Pub yesterday, it officially became a city.” Jonathan winked at him.

“You’ve done all this since we left the Island, Jonathan? How is that possible?” Nils was flabbergasted.

“Welcome to the wonderful world of prefab, Nils. That, plus an almost unlimited amount of money makes almost anything possible. At the present, however, there are only a handful of habitable structures, in spite of the actual number under construction. But don’t worry; your home is still pristine, and your beautiful view of the bay is unobstructed. The only new homes on that part of the island will be on the other side of the runway, and that won’t happen for a while yet. Most of the city will be in the valley, sheltered from the elements.”

“We weren’t worried, Jonathan.” Livia was actually finding herself looking forward to the move. And all the new families to meet and get to know ... “In fact we’re getting a bit excited about it all, and so are the children.”

“I don’t think we need to panic at this point, though. If Jonathan can make good use of his government contacts, I feel we can keep things on schedule. Especially since Sava has alerted us to the problem,” Dawson said, reassuringly.

“I wish I were as optimistic as you, Doctor, but I promised I’d follow your lead from now on. And I will.” Sava hesitated “However I do have a contact within the Builderbriar Club, a man who, for reasons I don’t need to go into right now, considers me a ... friend. I would like your permission to ...stretch the limits of that friendship.”

“Within the limits of the promise you made me, Sava, do what you can to find out what they want of us. There may be a chance that we can work this all out to our mutual satisfaction.”

Sava smiled at him. “A novel idea, Doctor. I’ll be sure to ask him about that possibility when I next see him. In the meantime, please, Doctor. Keep your family close for the next week or so; at least until we have more information.”

§

Eli handed Hannah a neatly-folded stack of jeans. “You’ll definitely need these. We’ll have a lot of exploring to do. Be sure to bring your hiking boots too.” Several open suitcases were scattered around the room in various states of fullness. “Since you can’t fly yet, we’ll have to find other ways to get around. Jack took all our bikes with him, the road to the lighthouse is paved now, and Jonathan has built a nice park at the top of the rocky ridge I flew over that night with Oskar. He had a bronze statue of a Phoenix placed there in our honor.”

Hannah was getting excited now. “And my camera! And my new swimsuit.” She held it up in front of her. “It was so nice of Jack to have it made for me, even though he won’t let me even grow my wings again until we’re safely on the island.”

“Well, it’s not as though he had to take your measurements or anything, Hannah.”

“I know, Eli; but still...” she grinned at her. “You’re just giving me a hard time, aren’t you?”

“It’s so easy I just can’t resist sometimes.”

Eli sat down on the edge of the bed. “Jack and Henry are already on the island getting everything ready for their mom to settle in. They just finished a house almost identical to her house here, but next door to your house on the north side of the compound. It’s a short walk to both our houses from there, and Jack’s will be just next door to that one. Henry is going to stay in his mom’s old house until they can sell it, and after we leave for good, he’s going to live in our house. Papa refuses to sell it, so Henry offered to take care of it for us. His job—and his girlfriend—are in London.”

Hannah was delighted. “Sweet Henry has a girlfriend? Why doesn’t he bring her?”

“I don’t know, Hannah. Maybe someday. Jack’s house is certainly going to be big enough for them all...unless Jack gets a girlfriend of his own.” Eli winked at her.

“Jack wouldn’t...I mean, he’s too busy. He doesn’t have enough time...” she stopped. “You’re giving me a hard time again!”

Eli smiled at her. “At any rate, if Henry does decide to come live on the island, with or without a ‘girlfriend,’ Papa is going to have a caretaker look after the house, so we can use it when we come to London.”

“Wow! It sounds like you’ve all really thought this out. I think Mom and Dad are just going to sell ours, once we decide if we want to stay on the island.”

“You have to stay, Hannah! You just have to!”

Hannah smiled at her, “Even if they don’t, I will, Eli. Mom and Dad already know how I feel, and they’re okay with it – when I’m eighteen. But we’re going to stay at least two months this time. If that doesn’t do it nothing will.”

“Papa says there are already two excellent teachers in the new school, and he and Mama are going to help out when they can. There are already 14 kids enrolled, and at least 3 are near our age. It’s going to be great fun! And there’ll be no secrets!”

“They’ll...all know about us?”

“Their parents already do, so why not? Jonathan says these are the ‘best of the best’ Archaeogenics’ employees. They have almost all been in on the research since the beginning. Some of them knew Gudmund quite well.

“It’s really exciting, Eli. Mom and Dad just told the school we were leaving yesterday. I admit, it didn’t really seem real to me until then.”

Finally satisfied, they carefully latched the overstuffed suitcases, leaving one small one open, ready for the last items to be packed in the morning.

“I’m a little jealous you’re going to get there before us, Hannah.”

“We’ll have a surprise waiting for you, Eli. I promise.” She pulled Eli into bed with her and turned out the light.

“It’s about time,” Jason yelled from his room. “It’s after midnight!”

“Goodnight, Jason,” Eli called out, cheerfully. “Sleep tight.”

“Goodnight, Hannah, Junior. And say ‘goodnight’ to my sister for me, although I don’t know why I should bother,” he grumbled.

“I love you too, Jason,” Hannah said, sarcastically.

Eli reached down and rubbed Einstein’s ears, and felt him wag his tail gratefully.

...Hannah was lying on her back in the field with Eli at her side, staring at the stars; head nestled snugly in Einstein’s soft fur. Eli eyed the boys in the tree carefully, baring her fangs and growling at them every time they attempted to climb down. They looked absolutely silly sitting there in a row, all naked and white in the moonlight, like three hairless monkeys. Hannah chuckled. “That’ll teach them to mess with you, Eli, my blood sister, my kindred spirit.

Hannah!

What, Oskar? You can't leave us alone for even a minute?

"You'd better listen to him, Hannah." John said. "He sounds upset to me. You'd better hurry home and see if he's okay."

Lamar and Rod nodded in agreement. "We promise we'll stay right where we are until you get back."

Hannah laughed, "Sure you will. And ducks have lips."

"What does that even mean, Hannah?" Rod sounded annoyed.

Hannah, please!

What, Oskar!?

Dad's been arrested. They're taking me away. And I don't know where Mom is!

She sat bolt upright in bed, trying to get her bearings. She fumbled for the light switch, turned it on, and shook Eli awake.

Eli! Something's happened to Oskar. And your Papa. He's been arrested!" She grabbed Eli's hand firmly.

"What are you talking about, Hannah? They're at home with Mama. You must be dreaming." She rubbed her eyes.

Eli, Oskar sobbed, they know who I am! They called me 'Oskar Eriksson' and said I had been kidnapped by Dad. They're taking us to jail.

Where's Mama, Oskar? Where's Mama!

Gone! I don't know where she is. She's not talking to me.

Hannah? Where's Mama? Can you find her? Or Papa?

Hannah, trembling now, reached out and, ...*Hannah! Tell Jack and the others not to come back under any circumstances! They're...*

What, Dr. Dawson? What?! Hannah jumped out of bed, dragging Eli with her.

Oskar's scream echoed in her skull. *Hannah! They're going to...Please don't! Please...*

"Eli, he's gone! I can't hear him anymore! I can't hear anyone anymore!"

"Who, Hannah?! Who can't you hear any more?"

“Your Papa! He was frightened. He told me to tell Jack not to come back after them! Then he was gone.” She grabbed Eli’s hand. “And Oskar...” she replayed everything for her.

“Hannah, try again. Please try again!”

“I...I can’t, Eli! There’s nothing! No one’s there!”

“What’s going on in there? Keep it down!”

“Someone’s kidnapped Oskar! And maybe Mr. and Mrs. Dawson too!” Hannah realized she couldn’t even hear Jason’s thoughts and he was in the next room. “Eli, I can’t hear ANYONE anymore! What’s wrong?”

Eli rushed down to the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of Ejuice out of the refrigerator, and gulped it down hurriedly on her way back up the stairs. She tore off her pajama top, opened the window, and hopped up on the ledge, digging her talons into the soft wood. “I’m going home, Hannah. Call Jack and Jonathan and tell them what’s happened! Tell them what Papa told you.” She unfurled her wings, leaped out the window, and was gone.

Jason already had his clothes on, and Hannah could hear her mom and dad talking excitedly in the living room. She was shaking so hard now, she was having trouble even buttoning up her blouse. *I have to calm down! I can’t do anything when I’m like this! I’m such a baby!* She stood up dizzily, tottered, caught her foot in the rug and fell into Jason’s arms as he rushed into the room.

“Take it easy, Sis. Dad’s talking to Jack right now. “ He helped her to the bed and sat down next to her. “Can you hear anything at all? Can you hear Eli?”

“No, Jason. It’s like I’ve lost everything,” she sobbed.

§

Eli was over halfway home now; close enough for Oskar to hear her – but there was nothing. Her heart was pounding in her chest, but there was no fear; just the clear focus and determination of the ancient predator that had reawakened with a vengeance the instant she cleared the chimney. Twenty years of happiness were shoved rudely and effortlessly aside by 250 years of predatory darkness and desperate loneliness; a loneliness she knew might become a reality again if she couldn’t get home in time.

She could see the house clearly in the distance now, the only one on the block with all the lights on; even the floodlights in the back yard, she realized. The abject silence was overwhelming. She felt more alone than she had felt since Jacob dragged him across the great hall, away from the banquet table, away from his sweet mother and into the unmitigated hell that was his life until Oskar caressed his face that night in Blackeberg.

She redoubled her efforts, finally swinging wide to the right and dropping below the treetops near the stream, using the tree-line as cover. She circled the house cautiously twice, noting the small black van parked in front of the house, before finally dropping softly to the ground between the garage and the fence, then moved slowly along the back of the garage, and slipped quietly into Mama's studio. She knew what she must look like right now, but it didn't matter. If they saw her this way, perhaps it would give her just enough time to kill them all before they could react. *To kill them all!* She welcomed the comforting simplicity of the predator's objective. It had made things so much easier for her during her centuries of loneliness, and it would make things easy for her tonight. Her rage overwhelmed her as she thought about what they must have done to Oskar to silence him. If he were conscious, she would hear him now. So he wasn't. They couldn't have moved him far enough fast enough for him to be out of range.

She moved cautiously down the hall toward the stairs. She heard movement in the basement and on the third floor, hesitated a moment, then crouched down on all fours and crept, cat-like, up the stairs.

She stood in her doorway a moment, watching them rummaging methodically through her drawers. They were dressed entirely in black, from their wool caps to their black deck shoes. These were definitely not policemen; she was certain of it.

Her refrigerator was open and empty, and Gudmund's photo albums were stacked neatly on the floor next to several open boxes. Oskar's Rubik's cube was on the floor next to her framed "Fairies in Flight" photograph. Her head suddenly felt huge; she could feel the blood pounding in her temples. She felt like she was about to explode. These THINGS, violating their home, taking Oskar and Papa from her...and Mama...

"Where is he?" she growled.

They both spun around, then stepped back, mouths open. One of them grabbed a semi-automatic pistol off the dresser. "I don't know who you are, but one step closer and I'll shoot!"

"She looks like the picture..." the other one whispered hoarsely. "This must be the girl..."

"Where is he?" she hissed.

"Who? Where is who?" He said, a bit unsteadily.

"OSKAR!! Where is he?" she growled.

"He's safe."

"Where?"

"I can't tell you that."

“Yes, you can. And you will.” She opened her mouth baring her fangs, and felt the sudden impact of the first bullet as it struck her squarely in the chest, slamming her against the bookcase. The second one whizzed by her ear. She leaped forward and in one smooth motion, crushed his gun hand to a pulp around the butt of the handle. His scream of agony was cut short by the sound of his neck snapping as she effortlessly spun his head almost completely around. She tossed him aside and grabbed the other one around the neck before he was halfway to the door.

“Where! Is! He!!” she hissed.

“Heading for Heathrow, along with his kidnapper. A private jet is standing by to take them to Manchester, to our facility there.”

“What facility?”

“The Builderbriar Conglomerate.”

Still holding him firmly by the neck, she pushed him down the stairs in front of her. “Take me to them!”

“Okay, Okay! Just don’t...” The bullet thundered past them and embedded itself deeply in the heavy Oak railing. Eli threw him aside roughly and launched herself down the stairs, cutting the newcomer off at the knees as he rushed up the stairs, gun raised. She heard his head strike the edge of a riser with a meaty thud as she braced herself against the wall, crouched and ready. His pistol bounced and clattered its way down the stairs, finally coming to a rest on Papa’s oriental carpet. He rolled over, pulled a wide-bladed black knife from his belt and, still dazed, slashed futilely at the air. She easily dodged the knife, then lunged at him, sank her fangs deep into his throat and bit down hard.

Her jaws met at the fourth vertebra. The sound of his spine snapping reverberated in the wide stairway.

“Take me to them. Now!” The lone survivor took one look at her bloody face, then stumbled down the stairs and stood at the door meekly. Eli hesitated a moment, then gently closed and locked the back door, turned off the floodlights, grabbed him by the neck and firmly escorted him out to the van.

“We’ll never be able to get there in time! They have a 15 minute head-start on us.” He stumbled as she threw open the door and shoved him inside. She pushed him over and sat down next to him.

“But you’re going to drive really fast and I’m going to navigate. Just do exactly as I say and we’ll be safe. And if you try anything – anything at all...” She rolled down the window. “Go!”

The van squealed away from the curb and headed for Heathrow.

“Run the light! You’re safe!”

He half closed his eyes and stomped on the accelerator. Another look at her blood-smeared face and chest had, in any case, removed any hesitancy he might have had to obey her every command.

“Slow down a bit...that’s it...now GO!” He swerved around the bus, regained control and shot forward, leaving a trail of honking horns and shaking fists in his wake, but that awful smell of blood and death was so close, he was certain he’d have a better chance of surviving a collision than defying her.

“This is pointless! If they see us coming, they’ll kill them both,” he bluffed. The look on her face told him that had been the worst thing he could have told her.

“Faster!!” It came out as more of a scream than a growl. She pressed her foot down hard on his and they lurched forward, narrowly missing a cab and several pedestrians, who scrambled hurriedly back up on the sidewalk. He could feel her breath on his neck as she tightened her grip on him.

He exited the Tunnel Road Traffic Circle and turned west onto Northern Perimeter Road. His mind was racing. They were close now, but he was sure they wouldn’t let them past the gate at this point. He shouldn’t even be here, and they knew it. He let up on the accelerator as they approached the driveway.

“Don’t stop!” she squeezed his neck hard.

He lowered his head and stomped on the accelerator. The wooden gate literally exploded, sending jagged yellow-and-black spears tumbling through the air in all directions. They vanished into the darkness on the tarmac before the guard had even exited the kiosk.

Eli gasped involuntarily as the familiar sound of a Learjet under full throttle filled the air. The brilliant headlights of the fast-approaching plane temporarily blinded them as it rushed past. They were too late!

She jerked the wheel hard to the right, and with the screech of tires, the van caromed down the narrow runway in hot pursuit, but she knew it was no use. They’d never be able to catch it now. Unless...

She flung the door open, leaped out, and curled herself into a ball. She jumped up as soon as she stopped rolling, unfurled her wings and was in the air in an instant. The van’s headlights momentarily illuminated her wiry frame and jet-black wings, and then she disappeared into the darkness in hot pursuit.

The lone survivor sat motionless in the van, hands tightly gripping the wheel, and watched as the plane’s lights blended with the stars and vanished finally in the aurora of the city’s soft glow, but he thought he could still just make out the small, determined, waif-like, eerily beautiful monster-child rising rapidly into the sky behind it. He breathed a sigh of relief and headed slowly back

toward the guard shack. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was now in very deep trouble. He had seen something he wasn't supposed to see.

Chapter 34: The Regrouping

“Are you sure we should have come, Nils? You know what Richard told Hannah.”

“I had to come. It’s the least we can do for them. I can’t believe these people, whoever they are, are willing to risk the publicity they would get if you and I turned up missing. Unlike the Dawsons, we both have very large families.” Just the same, he turned off his lights as they rounded the last corner. There was a black police van parked at the curb, and in the porch light he could make out two men standing in the open door. One was plainly a policeman; the other could be anyone. He pulled up behind the van.

“Stay here, Livia. I’ll see what they have to say.” He glanced across the street, and saw Maggie standing on the porch. “On second thought, why don’t you go talk to Maggie?” He strode purposefully up the path to the front door.

“Mr. Sandstrøm? I’ve been expecting you. I’m Inspector Wellington.” He turned to the uniformed policeman. “Terry, why don’t you go help them clean up? I can handle this.” He reached into his pocket and palmed a small gold medallion, which Nils recognized immediately.

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Is everyone okay? Where’s Eli? Where are the others?”

“I don’t know, sir. No one was here when we arrived. At least no one still alive.”

Nils gasped.

“No, no! None of the family is here. Only two men who have been quite decisively dispatched. They must have been caught in the middle of going through their personal belongings, since there are many open, partially-filled boxes lying about. If I had to guess, Eli got here before us, although we were here within 15 minutes of Jonathan’s call. Judging by the bullet holes in a bedroom bookcase and a split stair railing, and the blood spatter indicating where she was standing when she was shot, I am virtually certain she acted in self-defense. And unless she can drive, I suspect she’s taken one of them for a ride somewhere. Their van’s gone.”

“She’s after Oskar, I’m sure. And her Mom and Dad. You’ve heard nothing from them?”

“No, nothing, I’m afraid. They’ve probably all been taken.”

“No, Oskar told us that his mom was gone before they were grabbed. If she was okay, she never would have allowed this to happen. I’m really worried.” He glanced at the driveway, then on a hunch, hurried over and opened the garage door. “Her car’s gone. Why would they have taken her car?”

“If you’d like, we’ll issue an alert for her vehicle. But there’s only so much I can do without showing my hand,” the detective said. “Jonathan will be sending others over to watch the house and make sure nothing else is taken. Tell them everything you’ve told me. They can be much more...discrete than I can. In the meantime, I suggest you wait over at Mrs. Shaw’s house with

your wife. I don't think you want to see what's inside. She...did a quite thorough job on them." He paused, "What's she like, this Eli? How could she have it in her to do such a thing, even in self-defense?"

"She's a very complicated...child." Nils smiled grimly. "And you have to understand she was alone for a very long time before she found her family. I can't even imagine what she's going through right now." Nils knew the man would never be able to understand, but still... "What would you have had her do, Inspector, knowing what you do about her strength? Stand there like a child and watch the men who took her father and Oskar, and possibly killed her mother, ransack her room? And get shot or taken herself for her docility?" he realized he was talking too loudly now, but he couldn't help it.

Wellington put his finger to his lips and shook his head.

"We're ready, sir." Terry stepped out on the porch, just as the private ambulance pulled silently up to the curb. Nils recognized the small logo on the door. He had seen it on the island ambulance.

"I think you'd better join your wife, Mr. Sandstrøm. This is still a crime scene after all. I'll send someone over to notify you when we're finished.

Nils hurried across the street. "Did you call Jason, Livia?"

"I did, Nils. Hannah is worried sick, especially since she can't talk to any of them."

"Are they...dead?" Maggie whispered. "I saw five go in, and only three came out. One was carrying Oskar, and another was leading the doctor out in handcuffs. I called Jack right away and a few minutes after I got back, I saw Eli and the third man get into the van and leave."

"There are two dead, Maggie." He nodded toward the house, where two gurneys were already waiting on the sidewalk. "I think we should go inside until they've finished."

§

Eli's wings pounded the air fiercely, but after five desperate minutes, she knew she'd never be able to catch them. Still, there was nothing left for her to do but keep at it. And keep at it she did, long after she had lost sight of them herself. Her heart was pounding in her chest now, but she surged forward, straining to catch any smell, any sound that might guide her. Even the smell of burnt fuel was waning rapidly, and the light breeze was dispersing it to the point that she was now only guided by landmarks she knew would take her in the general direction of Manchester.

On and on she flew, lungs burning, each breath more difficult than the one before. And she was getting cold now. The freezing air burned her fingertips and ears; her eyes stung and finally, even her wings began to tremble. But she simply couldn't stop. Almost everything that gave her life meaning was either in that plane or gone. Where was Mama? Was she already dead? Had they killed her because she would most certainly have tried to stop them? After all, they had hardly

hesitated when they tried to kill her. She knew Papa would have bided his time, waiting for the right moment, but Mama? Mama was more like her – emotional and driven. It was part of their bond, this deep, mutual understanding of the effect the permanent scars of their darkness had on their lives in spite of how wonderful their recent lives had been together. Her love for Mama, she realized, was on a different plane altogether than her love for Oskar.

Dear Oskar! The love of her life -- even more so since they had become intimate, and she had discovered an even deeper, sweeter side to him than she could have scarcely imagined or even understood before. His thoughts when he directed his love toward her now were simply breathtaking. She simply couldn't bear the thought of him being alone somewhere, and afraid.

She bore down even harder, at the same time she was getting noticeably weaker, but Jack had warned her that they would never be as strong as they were before. She knew in her heart that she should turn back and go home – no, she had no home now; she should go back to Hannah's house.

But she couldn't bear the thought of giving up. If she gave up, it would mean she didn't love them enough.

And so, she kept flying. She flew until she could no longer fly. Finally, try as she might, she began losing altitude – slowly at first, and then more rapidly. She was sobbing now, and cursing her weakness; and gradually accepting what she knew would be the inevitable outcome. She began scanning the ground as it rose up beneath her, trying to judge how long before her flight would finally come to an end. She didn't know when it would happen, but she knew how. At full throttle, as Jack would say.

She watched her moon-shadow move across the ground beneath her, flickering and changing shape on the uneven surface, getting larger and larger as she descended. Finally, in a last-ditch effort to fend off the inevitable, she mustered up the strength for a few more powerful strokes, but it was no use. Her shadow rose up rapidly, suddenly became three-dimensional and...

"Butterfly! Please! Let me help you! Hold your wings still for a moment." Mama rose up gently beneath her, pressed herself against her and lifted her up. Eli's wings lay limp on hers a moment, then involuntarily dissolved quickly and quietly away into nothingness. She reflexively wrapped her arms around her Mama's neck and laid her trembling legs against her firm, powerful ones, feeling her warmth and strength, and finally, her love.

I thought you were dead, Mama. She pressed her cheek against hers, and kissed her on the neck.

And I was afraid you'd kill yourself before I could get to you, Butterfly. What were you thinking?!

"I wasn't Mama. I just knew I had to save Oskar and Papa.

"We will. I promise. They are in no immediate danger; I'm sure of it. We have plenty of time to work out where they are. We'll get them back. I promise you.

Eli squeezed her tighter. *I love you Mama.*

But there was far too much at stake for her to believe her completely. Oskar could die just because they gave him some sort of drug to put him out. How could they know how he might react to it? He wasn't quite human any more. And what if Papa changed in order to try to escape? They could kill him in an instant. She trembled as the nightmare scenarios presented themselves to her, one after another.

Elaine rose up and gently swung back towards home. *Let's get you home, clean you up, and get you into some warm clothes. Then we'll talk.*

Mama, they told me they were taking them to the Builderbriar Conglomerate in Manchester. How are we going to get them out?

It's a large facility, Eli, but not that large. Hannah will find them. As soon as she knows you're safe, she'll be fine. Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do with the two of you. You're as alike as two peas in a pod. You both leap before you look, and are pretty much useless without one other—and Oskar, she joked.

Mama was mostly right about them, she knew. But it didn't bother her at all. Mama was safe and Papa and Oskar were hopefully safe too, in spite of her failings. Mama was always right about such things, she told herself over and over again. Finally, exhausted, she lay quietly, feeling the powerful, unending, rhythmic thrusts of Mama's wings and her reassuring calmness as they approached the lights of the city.

§

Oskar rolled over and reached for Eli. When he couldn't find her, he opened his eyes, but he could see nothing at all. He held his hand up and touched his nose with his finger, but the blackness was deep; there was not a hint of light anywhere. He knew his eyes weren't yet as good as Eli's but it had been a long time since he'd had to turn on the light at night to find his way to the bathroom, as he had before the change. If there was any light at all, he'd see it. He was somewhere...different.

And gradually, he noticed the smell; a cold, metallic smell that he hadn't noticed at first, but was now very much evident. At the same time, his senses told him that he was in a much smaller room than either his or Eli's—perhaps because of the absolutely motionless air. But the subtle echoes in a normal room that his movement always caused—those echoes that reliably verified his overall impression of the size of a room—were simply gone. In direct contradiction to his other senses, the complete absence of echoes made him feel as though he were in a huge, cavernous, emptiness.

Where was he? He carefully sat up, hung his legs over the side of the bed...and realized he was completely naked. He grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around himself, not because he was cold—the room temperature was perfect, he realized—but because he felt extremely vulnerable.

He carefully planted his feet on the floor and stood up. As soon as he did, the room was suddenly filled with light.

He quickly sat back down on the bed, trying to comprehend what he was seeing. Copper. The floor was copper; brightly polished copper. The walls...weren't walls at all; they were made up of thousands of long, thin, copper pyramids nestled tightly together in a dizzying geometric pattern, all pointing directly at him; as was the ceiling, about 5 meters above his head, he estimated. But it was hard to get any sense of perspective. The only flat surface in the room was the floor...and the copper-clad door in the center of the far wall.

There was a small metal desk and chair next to the bed, but nothing else that he could see. But his clothes were there, freshly laundered and neatly folded on the chair. He hastily dressed himself. His wallet was on the desk, as well as his house keys, his watch, and some loose change, but his cellphone was gone.

He sat back down on the bed for a moment, then reached out ...*Dad? Are you there? Mom? Eli?!*

The ether was as deathly quiet as the room.

He glanced down at his watch: 6:30AM, Tuesday. TUESDAY! He had been asleep or unconscious for three days! Or maybe, even ten.

Where was everyone? Where was Mom? He remembered he had talked to Dad before they held him down and gave him a shot. And Hannah. He had talked to Hannah and through her, to Eli. He knew for certain that she would have come for him. But he must have been gone when she got home, or he wouldn't be here, he knew.

He absently scratched the back of his hand, felt something, and caught his breath when he saw the small, round bandage covering the very vein that Papa had used for his IV when he went through the change. Someone had put him on an IV while he was unconscious. Ten days didn't seem like a stretch at all to him now. He gently removed it – sure enough! The tiny scab was all the evidence he needed.

He was getting angry now. Who were these people? This was clearly against the law. He had been kidnapped and drugged. If they were really taking him back to Blackeberg, he certainly wouldn't be here, wherever 'here' was. He'd be in police custody like he was the first time he was caught. He'd have been questioned, his parents would come...but they wouldn't! They were in their 60's now. They'd never believe...

He paced around the room. *But these people know who I am, in spite of the impossibility of it all. Sava was right! The only ones who knew anything about them was the Builderbriar Club. It had to be them!* He began methodically examining the room. Why was it designed in such an odd way? What was it for? He saw no cameras, but did finally spot a few of the pyramids in the ceiling that were made of copper mesh instead of featureless copper like the others. *Probably for ventilation*, he thought to himself. *And most likely, cameras too.*

He quickly retreated to the bed when he heard the heavy bolts on the door slide back. It swung open slowly, and a pretty young woman poked her head in. “Good morning, Oskar. We didn’t expect you up this early. You caught us all by surprise.”

“How long have I been unconscious?”

She put a food tray on the desk and smiled at him. “You’ve been asleep for ten days. We had to make sure the ‘catalyst’ was out of your system before we could allow you to wake up. But I assure you, you were in no danger at any time. I’m sure you must be famished by now, in spite of the IV. Would you like something to eat?”

“Where’s Dad? And Mom?”

“They’re both safe too, Oskar, and nearby. Don’t worry about a thing. No harm will come to any of you, I promise. And if things work out, you could be on your way home very soon. It’s entirely up to you. Can we talk?” She pulled the chair away from the desk, slid it over to the bed and sat down facing him, uncomfortably close.

He instinctively moved back a bit, but he refused to let her intimidate him. “Where’s Eli? And when can we go home?”

“I’ll tell you everything, but I’d like a few answers from you right now.” She pulled out a small notebook. “Now, what is the outside range of your telepathic abilities?”

He looked at her blankly. “What do you mean?”

How far away does Dr. Dawson have to be before you can no longer hear him?”

He thought fast. “It varies a lot. Sometimes, miles and miles. Other times, just miles.” He smiled crookedly. “More or less.”

She stopped smiling and leaned forward, “Can you talk to him now, Oskar?”

“If I choose to,” he bluffed.

“Where is he then?”

“Nearby,” he said sarcastically.

“Elaborate.”

Oskar stared at her defiantly. “Why should I?”

“It’s a simple enough request, Oskar.”

“He’s unconscious. I can’t hear him.”

“No. He isn’t. He’s nearby and had been demanding to see you. We woke him last night.”

“You’re lying!” Oskar was scared now. Why couldn’t he talk to him? *Dad! Where are you?*

But there was nothing.

“Thank you, Oskar. You’ve been a big help. I’ll leave the tray in case you get hungry later.” She rose quickly, strode across the room and, without a word, pulled the door shut firmly behind her.

Dad? Mom? Please talk to me! But he was keenly aware that she hadn’t asked him where Mom was. If she was nearby, why didn’t she ask? And why did it matter to them whether or not he could talk to Dad right now? Or were they both dead? He flopped down on the bed, frustrated, and stared up at the copper ceiling.

§

“Where’s Sava?” Elaine stoked the fire and adjusted the blanket around Eli, who was still shivering a bit, even after the Ejuice.

“I don’t know, Elaine. Maggie, have you seen him?” Nils handed Eli a hot cup of tea.

“I hadn’t even thought about him, but no, I haven’t seen him in days. He certainly wasn’t here tonight, or there would have been a decidedly different ending to this in spite of his promise.”

“And where were you, Elaine? Oskar couldn’t talk to you when they arrived. He was terrified; he thought you were dead. And for all we know, he probably still does.” Livia felt so sorry for him. Would all this never end for them? First they were ignored and ostracized; now they were being pursued relentlessly-- in both cases, through no fault of their own.

“I had just jumped in the car and pulled out of the driveway when I saw the two vans, lights off, come around the corner. Hot chocolate had sounded so good to me that I was going to sneak out and surprise Rich and Oskar with some while they were watching a late-night film on television. My gut reaction was to drive around the corner and turn off the lights. I heard everything. Oskar was so terrified when they called him by his old name, I couldn’t even begin to talk to him – and finally decided it would be safer if I didn’t. After I realized they all had guns, I bided my time, and finally, when they came out with Oskar in their arms, decided my best strategy would be to follow them, which of course, I could easily do, even from a distance.”

“When they finally stopped at the auxiliary airport gate, I drove quickly past, parked a couple blocks down and jumped the fence. Two men carried Oskar to the plane and two others, one with a gun to Rich’s head, escorted him on board behind Oskar. They were, in my opinion, being far too careful; they clearly knew more about us than I had thought. They silenced Oskar immediately so no one could find them, indicating they had at least some knowledge of his telepathic abilities, but still they were vigilant, as though they were aware that they still might

have been followed. I crept up behind the plane, determined to stow myself in the wheel well. As small as it was, I could see that it would be possible, albeit, uncomfortable, and was just maneuvering myself into the small space, when I heard the gate splinter and watched the second van come rushing across the tarmac. I leaped out as soon as I recognized Eli, but within seconds, the plane, with the van right behind it, was moving too fast for me to catch them. I decided to follow the van back to the kiosk and listen in on their conversation. I not only confirmed my suspicions as to who they were, I memorized the numbers they called by listening to the keypad tones. However, I had no idea Eli would be so determined to follow them. I expected to find her nearby, mad as hell, and we'd head home together to warn the others. As it turned out, it took me almost an hour to catch up with her. I've never seen her fly so fast," she said proudly, putting her arm around her shoulders.

Eli smiled up at her. "I was...really mad, Mama—and scared."

"What do we do now, Elaine? Jack isn't coming back; nor are any of the others. What can we do?" Livia threw another log on the fire and rubbed Eli's arms briskly. "Are you warm enough, sweetheart?"

Eli smiled at her and nodded vigorously.

"First, we have to find Sava. Then we have to get Hannah working on this. She may be the only way we can safely communicate with the island now, especially with regard to our rescue plans. We have to assume they have all our phones tapped."

"We've secured the house, Ma'am. There will be four armed men guarding the house from now on with 'very loud' guns. The Club won't risk coming back and making a scene. They are very uncomfortable with unsolicited publicity."

"Thanks, Robert. And thanks for your prompt response. We fully understand and appreciate the danger you have put yourselves in by helping us."

He nodded, "Our pleasure, Mrs. Dawson." He hesitated, "We're just sorry we hadn't anticipated their taking action so quickly. If we had..."

"It's no one's, fault, Robert. They simply outsmarted us...this time. It won't happen again."

"No Ma'am." He disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

§

"I...I'm so sorry, Eli. I let you down when you needed me the most."

"No, you didn't, Hannah. Oskar couldn't communicate well in any case; he was too frightened. And he never got another chance, once he was drugged. Mama was deliberately lying low, and Papa...all he knew was that they'd been captured. He couldn't have told you anything we didn't find out for ourselves in the next couple of hours. Perhaps you might have talked me out of being

so stupid for trying to catch a jet plane, but I doubt it.” She squeezed her tightly, just thankful that they had all come through this with no fatalities so far. This ‘immortality’ wasn’t all it was chalked up to be.

“That WAS pretty stupid, Eli,” Jason grinned at her. “It reminds me of when Einstein used to chase our neighbor’s noisy, smelly old car. When he came back with that smug look on his face, I always asked him what he would have done with it if he ever caught it.”

Eli gave him a dirty look. “Don’t be silly, Jason; I wouldn’t have...” she grinned back. “You’re just giving me a hard time aren’t you?”

“Who, me? I wouldn’t think of it.” He paused. “But Einstein DID have a far better chance than you did.”

“Hannah? Jack wants to talk to you.” Elaine handed her one of the special cell phones Jonathan had sent to them in the days following Oskar’s and Rich’s kidnapping.

“Wow! What a cute phone! It’s so small!” she took it eagerly. “Jack? Are you okay? We’ve been so worried about you all. Did your mom make it okay?”

“Everyone one here is safe, Hannah, and mom has settled in nicely. She’s already making modifications to my home before it’s even complete. But I called because I want you to do something for me, besides trying to find Dr. Dawson and Oskar. I want you to find me.”

“But...why Jack? I know where you are.”

“Do you Hannah? Perhaps I’m not where you think I am. Can you see me?”

Hannah concentrated hard. “No, Jack, but I’ve never been able to see anyone so far away. You know that.”

“Bear with me, Hannah. I’m running an experiment right now. Keep trying until you think you’ve found me.”

“But you know already that I can see much further than Oskar, but not as far as the island. Are you trying to find out exactly how far I can see?”

“Not exactly, Hannah. I’m just trying to figure out why you seem able to see further in some directions than in others. And in quite stable ways, apparently unaffected by weather, or local site conditions – at least so far as we can tell.”

Suddenly, Jack’s smiling face flickered into her mind, then became crystal clear. “Jack! I see you! You’re on the plane! You’re...looking in a mirror. I can tell because you’re holding the phone in your left hand, but you’re right-handed. It’s your reflection.”

Jack laughed. "I can't put anything over on you can I? But you've proven my theory. And it means you are going to be an even bigger help to us than I thought before. Now then: if I were to tell you I'm not only in the plane, but circling directly over the island, can you tell me how high I must be?"

Hannah thought hard. She remembered learning in Science class that transmission towers were made really tall because of the curvature of the earth affecting the distance a normal radio signal could be transmitted. Did that mean that...

"Right, Hannah! Good for you! I just made an educated guess that telepathic signals might conceivably be highly directional.

Hannah punched the speaker button, put down the phone, grabbed a sketch pad, and scribbled furiously.

"The Pythagorean Theorem, right Jack?"

"Right, Hannah"

"Let's see... The hypotenuse is the Earth's radius, R , plus your height above the ground, h . ' d ' is the distance from me to you, and, at 90 degrees, the other leg of the triangle is just R , the distance from me to the center of the Earth. The distance d -squared, then, has to be equal to the Earth Radius plus your height, all squared, minus just the square of the earth's radius..." She drew it out just to be sure she had it right. "Then, multiplying it all out and subtracting out the R -squared, you get two times R times h , plus h -squared... I remember now! Since your height above the Earth is so very tiny compared to its radius, I can just ignore the h -squared, which gives me ' d ' approximately equal to the square root of two-times- R -times- h !"

"Bravo, Hannah!"

"Since the Earth's radius is about 4000 miles..."

"3963 miles to be a bit more precise, Hannah; at the equator, at least."

"Right, Jack; 3963... That means that if I want to figure out your altitude in feet, knowing that the island is about 300 miles away, converting miles to feet," she rapidly punched in all the numbers on her calculator, "I can use the factor... about 1.41 and solve for h . That means h is equal to d divided by 1.41, all squared. Which is about... 45,000ft! Jack! You can't be flying that high, can you?"

"We could, Hannah. But we're not. We're at about 25,000 feet, which means your thoughts have quite impressive ground penetration without significant signal attenuation. But then your parents have repeatedly warned me that you are a strong-willed child."

"Very funny, Jack. Ha Ha! But you're only partly right; I'm not a child."

“Well, Jack, I hope you’re satisfied. You’ve created another nerd. As if we didn’t have enough of them in the family already,” Elaine teased. “Hannah, you’ve outdone yourself! Now why don’t we let Jack tell us what it all means, and how we can best make use of all these numbers?”

“What it means, Elaine, is that Hannah’s natural range extends quite comfortably to Manchester from where she is now standing, despite the Earth’s curvature. If Oskar is there and awake, Hannah can see him, with or without his help. And she can’t. She should also be able to see Dr. Dawson.”

“But I can’t Jack! Why can’t I?” Hannah was genuinely frightened now. They couldn’t both still be asleep. It had been over a week since they had been taken. But if they weren’t asleep, then what?

“Hannah, I’m really scared!” Eli put her arms around her and laid her head on her shoulder.

Jack realized too late that he had said too much. “I’m sure there’s an explanation Eli. Hannah, keep trying. Sooner or later, you’ll find them. They’ll have to wake them soon. What use are they to them if they can’t question them?”

But Elaine suspected Oskar and Rich were merely bait. They really wanted Eli. And herself. The source of the infection. And she knew deep in her heart that they were right. Sooner, rather than later, they would both have no choice but to go after them. It was already difficult for her to hold back, and for Eli, it must be almost unbearable. Just one glance at her face told her everything she needed to know. Eli caught her eye, reached out, and gently touched her hand.

When, Mama?

Chapter 35: Prisoners

Finally! Dawson put down the book when he heard the key turn in the latch, and waited patiently for the door to open. A tall hawk-nosed man with a receding hairline and horn-rimmed glasses scanned the room methodically, then sat down at the end of the table and placed his briefcase in front of him.

“Good evening, Doctor Dawson. I trust you’ve had a nice dinner. I’m essentially in charge of your care while you’re with us. I’ll also be in charge of your...interrogation, if you will. My name is Adrian.”

“Well, Adrian, what is it you want of us that made you willing to take the risk you’ve taken by kidnapping my son and myself?”

“Believe me, it’s no risk at all, Doctor. Even if we let you go, you dare not go to the authorities. We know who Oskar is, remember? His DNA alone is proof of his lineage, and his parents would almost certainly be in no mood to view the spiriting away of their only son favorably; even at this late date.”

“Likewise, you can’t afford the publicity that would be generated by his youthful appearance at the ripe old age of 27. Something, by the way, that I would be more than happy to explain to the press, should they happen to ask.”

“It is what it is, Doctor. The storm will ultimately be easy to weather once we know the secret has been destroyed, and all those involved have been...handled. With Oskar as the only anomaly, who now appears to be aging normally, the excitement will all die out in time – especially once we have destroyed the ‘catalyst’ and its accompanying research.”

They clearly have, or had, someone on the inside, Dawson thought to himself. Jonathan called Ejuice the ‘catalyst’ for a short time before we renamed it. Before that, it had only a number. There was only a two- or three-week period when it was known by that name. Since then, everyone has called it ‘Ejuice.’ If the informant was still there, he would know this.

“Again, why take only Oskar and myself? Why not the whole family?”

“Because, Doctor, as you know, we could not possibly handle either your wife or your ‘daughter’ on their turf. But if they were to, together or separately, come to us, it would be an altogether different matter.” He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. “And how is Oskar doing, Doctor? Is he happy with his accommodations? His meals? His entertainment?”

“How would I know? You haven’t allowed me to see him!” *Calm down! You can’t let him get to you.*

“Now that IS a surprise to me, Doctor. You see, I know all about his abilities. It seems a shame that he seems to have...lost some of them. Very mysterious. Why do you suppose that is?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Come, Doctor, don’t waste my time. I know he has telepathic abilities. And I also know he’s the only one.”

So! He knows about Oskar. But he doesn’t know about Hannah? Does he know about the abilities of the rest of us? He thought hard. *If they knew I was as dangerous as Elaine, why would they have taken the chance with me? Answer: They don’t know! Their knowledge is sketchy at best.* He breathed a sigh of relief, tempered by the knowledge that, by this time, he WAS effectively without any abilities. Ten days was more than enough to purge his system of the Ejuice. But he should still be able to talk to Oskar, if he were conscious – or alive. “What have you done to him?!”

“Don’t worry Doctor. He’s alive and healthy. And very close. With just a bit of effort, we’ve found a way to neutralize his telepathic abilities. Unfortunately, the method would be useless in an everyday environment, which is why we consider this ability so dangerous. And the flying! How did you ever figure that one out? First he couldn’t; then he could – and then, for a brief time, he couldn’t. And we have pictures to prove it.” He opened his briefcase and tossed out a series of photographs that he recognized immediately – pictures taken by Marcus, but these were very high quality. Oskar’s face was well-defined in the photograph where the two of them were flying together through the eye. There was no mistaking it. And Eli, wings spread, with Oskar’s arms around her neck in front of the cave was crystal clear.

At least we know where he got a good portion of his information.

“Now, this is the interesting part, Doctor. And believe me, it was a difficult concept for our top scientific ‘consultants’ to grasp. But scientists just delude themselves into believing they are realists. When reality bites them, they are generally just as reluctant as religious fundamentalists to accept the truth.”

He slid an enlarged photo of the cave entrance in front of Dawson. Eli and Oskar were sitting side by side in the damp grass with Oskar’s upturned arm resting across Eli’s knees, which were drawn up against her chest.

Her fangs were clearly visible, as was the thin rivulet of blood running down her leg. And her eyes were golden.

“A picture is worth a thousand words, as they say. And then, there’s this.” He tossed another photo on the pile. “Guilt by association, wouldn’t you say, Doctor?” The photo of Eli and Elaine at the beginning of their first flight was prominent in the photograph of Eli’s bookcase. “The fact that this one was apparently taken some time ago, and well after sunset, is quite suggestive, don’t you think?”

They probably have everything by now, he thought to himself. All Gudmund’s albums, all the journals, save the ones from the vault, and perhaps even the samples from the basement lab. He sighed. This was an unmitigated disaster.

“So, Doctor. They both are, or were, vampires. Clearly, your research has given them both a bit of a respite with regard to daylight sensitivity. What a marvelous thing you and Mr. Shaw have accomplished! My hat’s off to you both.”

He must know about Jonathan. How could he not? “Dr. Shaw is a gifted scientist. I couldn’t have done it without him.”

“Perhaps, Doctor. We’ll see. But our journey has just begun. We have all the time in the world, now. And we’ve already begun the search for ...others. Common sense tells us they must be out there somewhere.”

Dawson smiled. “Just make sure you don’t ultimately find yourself grabbing the tiger by the tail. You must realize there has to be a compelling reason why they’ve been able to successfully hide themselves from us all these centuries.”

“Come, come, Doctor; they can’t be all that bad. You’ve adopted one and seduced the other. How dangerous can they ultimately be?”

He’s not only arrogant, he’s ignorant. Good!

“Now don’t get me wrong, Doctor. I’m quite aware of their potential. In fact I must confess; we did underestimate the small one’s tenacity and resourcefulness. She caused us a bit of trouble, but nothing that we couldn’t handle.”

“Eli! Her name is Eli.” *Good for her!*

Adrian smiled at him. “And if she feels as strongly about your relationship as you do, she’ll be joining us soon, I’m sure. After all, she already has a good idea of where you are. We made sure of it.”

But it’s been over ten days and they still haven’t come. Good! He desperately hoped that cooler heads would prevail, but he really wasn’t sure if any of those existed in their group. Jonathan for sure, and perhaps Jack, but it would be difficult for Jack to resist both Eli and Hannah. Elaine might wait, but not too long. Sooner or later, they would come. All he could do was hope they knew what the risks might be.

“What can we do to get you off our backs? Surely there must be some way we can accommodate one another.”

Adrian leaned forward, elbows on the table and hands clasped tightly together. “Simple, Doctor. You can accommodate us by destroying all your research, placing your infected children and wife under our control, and walking away with your life intact.”

Dawson knew, then, that he was lying. Adrian knew of their connection with Archaeogenetics, and consequently their connection with Genterapi. He also knew this research had reached

critical mass; too many people knew about it now for them to ever hope to contain it, short of massacring everyone on the island, and destroying his lab at Oxford. He looked into his steely blue-gray eyes, and was suddenly convinced that, indeed, this might be his ultimate goal. “You know I’ll never give them up, Adrian. It would be quite impossible. Is there no other way?”

“I’m afraid not, Doctor. We’ve given it a great deal of thought. Similarly, we’ve given a great deal of thought to how we can get your cooperation.” He casually reached into his briefcase, held up what appeared to be an American Bowie knife and placed it on the table in front of him. “I know this would likely be useless on you, Doctor, or at least, inefficient and messy. But Oskar? He’s a child. And not quite human, if I understand the ramifications what you’ve done correctly. I even wonder if he still falls under the jurisdiction of our legal system any more than would an ape or chimp. I’ve been assured by the best lawyers money can buy, that your wife and daughter definitely fall outside its protection.” He stood the knife on its tip, spun it, then let it fall heavily to the table. “And I don’t even care if he’s willing to cooperate or not after I threaten to remove, perhaps... an eye?” He smiled at him. “It’s your cooperation we’re after. We need to know the full extent of your research, and the names of everyone involved.”

“You...you wouldn’t. You couldn’t do such a thing. He’s just a child.” His head was spinning. *Who are these people? What planet are they from? More to the point, what century do they live in?*

Adrian, almost as though he had read his thoughts, rose up, raised the knife over his head and unceremoniously plunged it into the back of his left hand, pinning it to the table. Just as quickly, he twisted it free, wiped the blade carefully on his handkerchief, and sat down again, watching Dawson’s face calmly, trying to get the measure of the man.

The pain was excruciating! Dawson grabbed his hand and pressed it firmly against his chest, trying to stem the blood flow, at the same time trying to process what had just happened. He knew he was in shock; his breath was fast and shallow, he was trembling all over, and he knew he could pass out at any moment from the pain alone. The worst part was the abject reality of what had been done to him – and the fact that a man could do such a thing to him and remain emotionally unaffected by it. He also realized he had greatly underestimated the resolve of the Builderbriars.

Papa! You’re hurt! Eli’s shock and blind rage washed over him like a flood. For a moment, he could feel the wind whistling by her ears and feel the powerful thrusts of her wings, and the weight of Hannah on her back. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they were gone.

“Doctor? Do we understand each other now?”

Dawson nodded reflexively, gathered himself together and with great difficulty, looked directly at him. “You’ve made a big mistake by electing to follow this path, Adrian. Perhaps a fatal one. You’ve underestimated my resolve, and more importantly, you’ve grossly underestimated the resolve of others, who have, in their very long and dark lives, survived horrors the likes of which are most certainly well outside the scope of your limited imagination. I can only suggest that

you watch your back carefully from now on.” He stood up unsteadily. “You’ve personalized a war you can never hope to win.”

“Time will tell, Doctor. Time will tell.” He closed his briefcase and headed for the door. “I’ll tell Oskar you said ‘hello.’ I’ll also send someone in to look after your hand. We wouldn’t want it to get infected, would we?”

The blood soaked his shirt and slowly pooled up on the floor beneath his chair. *Eli? Hannah? Are you there? Please! Please tell Elaine. And Sava! Please Eli! You can’t do this alone. They’re waiting for you!*

But there was only silence.

§

“Click!”

Ryan put his book down, listened intently, then began reading again.

“Click!”

“Damn it, who’s....” he rolled off the bed, crouched low, and moved over to the window. *Sava!* He stood up and waved, then slipped on his shoes, closed the door quietly behind him, and wordlessly followed Sava down the street to the car. Janice was already holding the door open for him.

“Why does he always pick you up first? I would have loved to have tossed pebbles at your window in the dark.” He grinned at her.

“I think he enjoys my sparkling personality and intellectual banter, Ryan. And it gives us more time to talk about all your character flaws.”

“Those must be really short conversations then. What do you talk about the rest of the trip?”

“Actually, I pick you up first because you’re closer to the airport, Janice,” Sava said dryly. He turned on the lights and pulled away from the curb.

Ryan rolled his eyes, then winked at her. “You’re no fun, Sava.”

Sava sighed impatiently. “Sorry to have come on such short notice, but I have the strong feeling—which I have been unsuccessful so far at conveying to the others—that things are coming to a head with the Builderbriars. I’ve made a difficult decision, which could conceivably put the both of you in danger. I’m sorry.”

They looked at each other.

“You may get a call from me within the next couple of days, after which you’ll have to make a quick decision. So I’m giving you both the chance to think about it ahead of time.”

This sounds really serious, Ryan thought to himself. “What is it, Sava? Are the others in danger?”

“Unlike the Dawsons, I believe so. But my life experiences are much different than theirs. Consequently, I’m predisposed to look at the worst-case scenario.”

Ryan was suddenly suspicious. “Do the others know you’re here, Sava?”

“No. They don’t. I’ve deliberately kept this from them. In fact, since I began my little ‘quest’ I haven’t been in contact with them at all. I didn’t wish to have to lie to them.” He paused. “But I won’t lie to either of you; in fact feel free to call them if you wish. The only favor I ask is that you put that off until you get my call. You have my word that my actions, even if they fail, will put no one in danger before then.”

“Okay!” Janice glanced apologetically at Ryan. “I’m sorry! I should have let you answer first. It’s just that...I trust Sava completely. And I’m really at a disadvantage here, not really having met any of the others. I feel kind of like an outsider who’s been asked to make a decision I don’t really have the right to make.”

“It’s okay. I trust him too. What decision do you want us to make, Sava?”

Sava reached back over the seat and handed each of them an envelope. “These contain instructions, a bit of money, and charter airline tickets to Belfast. From there, it’s a relatively short trip to the island.” He paused. “It would be a one-way flight; at least for the foreseeable future.”

“You mean, we’d be going for good? But our families! What would we tell them?” The thought of actually going to this mysterious island was an exciting one to Ryan, but at the cost of not being able to see his family again? And more importantly, not being able to tell them?

“That’s why I’m giving you advance warning, Ryan. I can’t answer these questions for you. I can tell you that, once there, you will be able to tell them you’re safe, and have gone voluntarily. But no more than that for an indeterminate amount of time.”

“But could we communicate with them after that?”

“No promises, Janice. You could inadvertently put their lives in danger by doing so.”

“It’s a lot to think about.” Ryan opened his envelope and examined the contents.

“It is. Consequently, I don’t expect an answer right away. And if you choose to stay, we’ll do our best to continue to protect you here, but there are no guarantees. They have many more resources than we do. And a great deal more money at their disposal.”

“But...there’s over two thousand pounds in here! Why would we ever need that much money?”

“Just read the instructions, Ryan. It’ll all be clear once you do.” He pulled the car up in front of Janice’s house.

Janice slipped a note into a small envelope, sealed it, and handed it to Ryan. “I’ve already made my decision. But you have to promise not to open this until after you’ve made yours.”

He looked at her intently, trying to get a sense of what she might be thinking, but she was unreadable. But, the fact that she had made her decision so quickly comforted him somehow. “Do you have another envelope?”

He scribbled his own note hastily, folded it up carefully and slipped it into the envelope she handed him. He sealed it carefully and handed it back to her. “I’ve decided. May I open your envelope now?”

“I strongly suggest you both wait until I call. I hadn’t expected either of you to decide so quickly. And if you should, after a bit of reflection, change your minds, no harm done. You can just tear up each other’s envelope, unread. I don’t trust snap decisions; they’re too often made for emotional reasons. This is far too important for that,” he said sternly.

“I don’t make ‘snap’ decisions, Sava.” Janice said, testily. “And, believe me, you really have no idea what I’ve decided. Nor do you, Ryan. I hope you didn’t jump to any conclusions based on how quickly I made my choice.”

She was still unreadable. “No, Janice; the only influence your decision had on mine, was to make me realize that there would be nothing more forthcoming from Sava. We had all the information we were going to get, and the choice was an obvious one for me.” He hoped he sounded convincing. He clearly wasn’t as certain as Janice seemed to be. And perhaps he had assumed too much as a result of Janice’s quick choice. No matter. It was done, and he had no desire to change anything.

Sava waited until Janice was safely inside, then pulled away from the curb.

“Sava? Will you be in any danger? Do you really have to do this? Janice and I have gotten...quite used to having you around. If something happens to you, we would be...” he felt uncomfortable trying to put his thoughts into words. “very upset.” *How stupid did that sound?* “And how will we know? If something happens to you, I mean.”

“You’ll know, Ryan. I’ve seen to it.” They rode on in silence for a while.

“Sava, I know you’ve said it’s none of our business, but...” he hesitated, then plunged ahead. “How do you...eat? I know you’re a vampire, but I can’t...”

“Do you really want to know, Ryan? Or would you rather just go on hoping that I’m too civilized to dine in the traditional manner?”

Ryan thought about it. “It’s important for me to know, Sava. Not so much because I want to judge you, but mainly so I can attempt to understand you. You told us you remain a vampire by choice. I need to know what that choice means; or perhaps, what it doesn’t mean.”

“I’m over 300 years old, Ryan. You must know what that means, at least.”

“I do. But that was then; this is now.” He knew Eli was over 200 years old, so he knew she had killed to survive. But he also knew that her recent choices had made her who she is now. And she was easy to forgive.

“I made my choice too, Ryan. But it wasn’t Eli’s choice, though I asked myself many of the same questions she asked herself. The only concession I’ve made is to acquire most of my food through channels provided to me by Dr. Dawson. But there are occasions when I find it not only necessary, but quite satisfying to feed in a more...primitive fashion. Does that answer your question adequately?”

“I don’t know, Sava. I suppose I could ask you what those occasions are, but I’m not sure I’d be comfortable with your answers.”

“You’re wise for your age, Ryan. However, for your edification, I’ll only add that when those occasions occur, they’re never random.”

Ryan felt a cold chill. As much as he was inexplicably drawn to Sava, he had always made him feel a bit uneasy, like he might feel around a ‘reformed’ serial killer. “Okay, I think I’m done asking questions.”

Sava smiled at him. “I’m really quite harmless you know – as long as I’m well-fed.” He joked.

Like a tiger, Ryan thought to himself. He actually found himself feeling sorry for whomever Sava had in his sights over the next few days.

§

“Come on, Hannah! We won’t go far; just high. We’ll tell Mama and the others after we’ve found Oskar and Papa. I promise.”

“Okay! Okay! Let me change first,” she whispered. She closed the door quietly, and rummaged through her dresser. “Jason hears everything, as I’m sure you know by now, and he’s become annoyingly overprotective. He’s been even worse since you were shot in my meadow. He’s almost as bad as Mom.” She slipped her black jacket on over her heavy wool sweater.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed. He kind of likes you, Hannah.” Eli grinned at her and held out her harness. “We’ll be back before he notices and we’ll wake him up with the news.”

Hannah slipped on her black trainers and stepped up on the chair, pulling her wool cap down over her ears. “He wouldn’t be happy about what we’re doing in any event, I think.”

“He’ll just be jealous because he couldn’t go himself.” Eli leaped nimbly up on the window sill, waited until she heard the snap of the clip and felt Hannah’s arms around her neck, then leaned forward and launched herself into the darkness.

Within five minutes they were high enough to see the relative darkness marking the furthestmost extremities of the city, though Barnet still lay almost directly beneath them. Hannah could still just make out the new lights surrounding the field at Old Finchleians, where a game was underway.

Despite her promise, Eli began moving steadily towards Manchester. Hannah was a bit nervous, but at Eli’s urging, directed her attention northward-- and downward, towards the living Earth.

And as she reached out in earnest, she realized she could feel the presence of...others; mysterious fleeting thoughts of strangers in strange places, some very dark, others prey-focused, and still others almost catatonic, winking in and out of existence like flickering candles. But there was a barrier between Hannah and these others; something--a wall--that kept her from seeing more than a gray smear, a mere shadow of what they were and what they were about, perhaps a natural barrier between humanity and the non-human, between those capable of human empathy and those others who lived among humanity but marched to a darker drummer; those to whom humanity was peripheral and inconsequential.

But as muddled and attenuated as they were, their sadistic, inhuman thoughts still pricked at her like tiny needles...sharp and cruel and black. She shuddered. “Eli, there are hundreds of them! Maybe thousands.”

“You need to think about Oskar and Papa, Hannah. Nothing else, or you’ll be lost in them.” And Eli remembered. She remembered the many who surrounded her when she was turned; how Gudmund’s father delighted in the children’s terror when he fed them their dark, sadistic thoughts. She certainly didn’t envy Hannah her ability to hear them now.

Hannah shoved them all into the background, determined to help Eli find Oskar and Papa. And gradually, they faded and became faint and harmless white noise. And rising out of the dim background, was a voice, a familiar voice, ...*surely there must be some way we can accommodate one another.*

Hannah pressed her cheek against Eli’s. “I found your Papa! He’s talking to someone called...Adrian. They’re talking about ...you and your Mama. And...”

...You couldn’t do such a thing. He’s just a child...

She gasped. “ELI!!” She tightened her grip around Eli’s neck.

And Eli saw everything. And she felt everything. And she fell out of the sky like a rock, carrying Hannah with her, still holding her tightly in a death grip.

She recovered quickly and flung her arms out ramrod-straight. They jerked to a stop with a sharp crack, like a sail catching a sudden change in the wind, as her wings caught the air again and lifted them up.

Papa! You're hurt! She felt her talons grow, black as her rage; her hands balled up into fists and her claws dug into her palms—and the pain focused her anger. Her eyes became iridescent gold, framed blood-red.

Jack! Mrs. Dawson!! Eli's papa... the tears welled up in Hannah's eyes and she screamed for them to come.

Elaine leaped to her feet and dropped her cup of tea, which shattered unnoticed on the kitchen floor.

Jack ran his golf cart into the stairs, spilling Jonathan and himself onto the damp grass in front of his new house. Maggie rushed down the stairs to their aid.

Sava savagely pulled the car over to the side of the road deep into the bushes, stripped off his shirt, slung two black duffle bags across his back, and launched himself into the night sky over Sunderland.

Oskar threw himself across the room and pounded his fists against the shiny copper door until they bled. "Dad! I'm here! Dad!" he screamed.

Chapter 36: Darkness and Light

Callum carefully locked his car, stepped up on the sidewalk and headed for the office, four blocks down. He knew no one was there, but there was no point in taking any chances. It was a shit job, but a job nonetheless. And it paid well. He was lucky they hadn't fired him outright after his last of many failures, but one thing he had to admit; they did take care of their own. But Sunderland? He felt like he had been banished to Siberia. As they had so logically put it to him at his hearing, "You're going to be in charge of the archives, and the archives are in Sunderland. Take it or leave it." He had taken it. There really wasn't much else he could have done. He had no college education and no real trade, unless 20 years in the service counted as a trade. No, he was quite lucky they had been as understanding as they had been. The job was a perfect fit, they had told him. *Yeah. No brains required; only brawn.*

Sava quietly stepped out of the alley behind him, matching his pace and stride perfectly. Callum glanced at his watch, then sped up just a bit, completely unaware of Sava's presence no more than three feet behind him.

He could see the office clearly from here. *Where is he? I told him this would be his only opportunity in the near future. And mine.* He quickened his pace, eager to get the whole thing over with. Perhaps he wouldn't show up, and that would be the end of it. This small window of opportunity would be closed, and it would be over a month before the chance would present itself to him again. And by then, the way things were going so well for them in Manchester, it might not be as advantageous to him as it would be now. He keyed in his code on the pad, waited until he heard the bolt slide back, then jerked the door open.

"Good evening, Callum. Right on time, as usual, I see."

He spun around reflexively, and grabbed for his gun, "Damn it, Sava! You're going to get yourself shot if you keep doing that to me." *For all the good it would do,* he thought to himself.

Sava grinned, and pushed past him into the dark hallway. "You need to stay more alert. That's what got you here in the first place, if I remember correctly."

Callum strode past him angrily, flipped on the lights, and jabbed the elevator button. "You've got two hours. Make good use of it. And remember, nothing leaves the building." He stepped into the elevator, pressed the button for the sub-basement, and glared at him.

"If what you've told me pans out, two hours will be more than enough."

Callum stepped out of the elevator ahead of him, slipped his keycard into the slot next to the door opposite the elevator, and punched in a different code. The door slid silently into the wall. "These arrived yesterday, but haven't been filed yet." He gestured to a stack of metal boxes, all with unique 10-digit numbers stenciled on their sides. "But I think you're more interested in the meeting minutes, if I understood you correctly." He turned right, down the first passageway, which was lined with dark grey filing cabinets. "The ones closest to us are the latest. The minutes of the original meetings at the turn of the century, along with corresponding project

schedules and travel itineraries are at the far end. Remember! Put everything back exactly as you found it, or I could get into deep trouble. A couple of the older employees are perfectionists. They'll notice if anything is out of place – perhaps not right away, but eventually.”

“Don’t worry, Callum. The last thing I want to do is get you in trouble.” He headed quickly toward the far end of the corridor. “Are you staying, or should I meet you upstairs when I’m done?”

“I’ll stay. Just in case you need something.” *Or just in case you’re tempted to do more than just look*, he thought to himself. In spite of everything, he didn’t trust Sava. After all, he wasn’t really human. Why would he feel obligated to follow human rules of honorable conduct?

Sava laid folder after folder on the floor beside the tripod and took high-resolution photographs of everything in order, following logical trails of corruption, influence, and bribery. His years as Gudmund’s assistant, plus his own deep interest in photography, made it easy for him to optimize his time. The high-speed film he had selected, along with its low granularity, guaranteed nothing would be lost.

But, as damning as some of the material was, he knew he had found no ‘defining moments’ that could be used in persuasive sound bites to easily convince the public of the Club’s danger to open society and even democracy itself. It would require meticulous work and long detailed exposés, which the Club, with its vast resources, could easily counter with a public relations blitz. In short, he had found no smoking gun. He glanced at his watch. *It’ll have to do. I’ll see what Jonathan can make of it all, but we’ll have to move fast. I doubt that we have much time left.*

He waved to Callum, who by this time had leaned his chair against the wall at the far end of the hall, and was deeply engrossed in a book.

“Done already?” he glanced at his watch. Sava packed up his equipment and met him at the door.

“You don’t look happy, Sava. Couldn’t find what you were looking for?”

“It’s all there, but the minutes were transcribed so carefully that you have to read between the lines to see what’s really going on. Given the time, we’ll be able to unravel it, but it will be difficult. I would love to have been a fly on the wall in those meetings, though.”

Callum took a deep breath. “How about the next-best thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Those meetings were all recorded on film beginning in 1930, and then, later on tape. We’ve just completed a process whereby everything has been meticulously transferred to the new DVD format. Would you like to see them?”

Sava eyed him suspiciously. “Why didn’t you tell me about this earlier? It would have saved us both a great deal of time.”

“You can’t take anything with you, remember? In that context they’re useless, other than to, perhaps, fill in some blanks for you now that you have a good overview. Do you want to see them or not?” he bristled.

“Of course! But isn’t my time up?”

“I’ll give you another hour in the vault, but that’s it. Count your blessings. And consider my debt to you paid in full.”

Sava grinned at him. “As you wish.” He followed him past the elevator and down the long hallway to the left toward the center of the building. The corridor curved sharply to the left, then widened out into a large concrete-walled room 15 meters on a side. In the center of the room was a huge grey box-like structure about 10-meters square, with a massive round vault door set into the center of the wall facing them. “A fireproof vault? I can’t believe this was built just to hold a century’s worth of old films and videotapes.”

“But it was. Which gives you some idea of their value to the Club.” He handed Sava a key card, then pulled out his own and held it over the slot. He gestured to an identical slot on the right door frame. “We need to insert these simultaneously.”

Sava moved quickly to the other side of the door.

“Three...two...one...now.” A blue light came on over the keypad in the center of the door, Callum quickly punched in a 12-digit number, spun the wheel, and the door opened smoothly and silently, revealing floor-to-ceiling racks filled with film canisters, video tapes, and finally, clear plastic DVD cases. In the center of the room was a long table with a DVD player at one end and a projection television at the other.

Callum pulled several DVDs off the shelf and handed them to Sava. “I think these might be of particular interest to you. In the meantime, I’m going to wait outside in case of trouble. I’ll flick the hall light off and on if anyone enters upstairs. If that happens, you have to exit the vault immediately.”

Sava sat down with his notebook and put the first DVD in the player. Once it began, he realized immediately that it was the quarterly meeting recorded in September, 1936, in all its black-and-white, grainy splendor. He was certain he recognized at least one of the participants from the newspapers of the time, and another with a thick German accent he knew was an influential international businessman. The discussion centered on Hitler’s armies entering the Rhineland, and the Builderbriars’ concentrated, and apparently successful, efforts to keep France and Great Britain from retaliating, including specific references to bribery, blackmail, voter fraud, and murder. The main concern seemed to be their growing financial interests in the awakening German economy, and their efforts to preserve their investments at any cost. Sava realized immediately how big this was. Historians had pretty much agreed that if military action had been

taken at this time, Hitler would have never been able to remain in power, and the war would never have escalated into a world war. He simply had to get a copy of at least this one disk. It condensed what might have been months of detective work into a simple oral exchange between a dozen extremely influential world figures. It could bring their organization crashing down around them.

He was startled by a sudden noise behind him, and turned just in time to see the heavy vault door closing. He leaped up, hurled his chair into the rapidly-shrinking gap, then lunged for the door as it slowed a bit; the light metal chair had at least postponed the inevitable for a few seconds.

He knew he was taking a real chance, but he suspected that the mechanism, although designed to move an extremely heavy mass, was not designed to overcome any significant resistance. With that in mind, he threw himself into the gap, managed to press one foot against the door and, with his back wedged against the frame, brought it to a grinding halt. With a bit more effort, he managed to widen the gap enough to wiggle through.

He knew he didn't have much time. All sorts of silent alarms must have gone off at this point, and Callum was nowhere to be seen. He sprinted down the hall, wrenched open the door to the archives, and grabbed two black dufflebags off the floor, emptying their contents in the corridor as he hurried back to the vault. Making sure he had his camera equipment and the critical disk first, he swiped as many shelves full of disks as he could into the dufflebags, then headed back towards the elevator, thought better of it, and took a quick detour up the stairs after tearing the locked door off its hinges.

Well! It seems as though I underestimated Callum's cleverness, he thought to himself, as he sprinted past the elevator. A chair Callum had placed in the elevator had kept the doors from closing. He knew now that Callum had planned this out carefully; probably to redeem himself and end his banishment. If the vault door had closed, even he might not have been able to escape and the Builderbriars would have captured their first true vampire, a real feather in Callum's cap.

§

Callum hurried down the street as fast as he could go, without attracting undue attention. He knew something had gone wrong; the light panel by his office still glowed red when he passed, indicating the vault door was not secure. He realized at once what that could mean, and fled for his life after jamming the chair in the elevator door. Once safely away, he'd call the office, tell them a vampire had compromised their security and broken into the vault. Perhaps he could salvage at least his job, especially now that the Builderbriars had finally taken the initiative and had begun rounding up the creatures. Perhaps they might even reassign him to Manchester, where he could be part of the action again. Maybe...

He had almost made it to the car when the end came, silently and swiftly, from above. And without remorse. Or regret.

§

Eli felt the darkness rise up in her once again; the resurrection of the darkest of the darkness they had killed that special night in her Papa's home after she had made her decision to become weak and defenseless for love's sake.

And, for an instant, Eli's thoughts suddenly became a grey smear to Hannah, indistinguishable from all the others. "We have to go back, Eli! We need help. Your Papa said we can't do this alone! Please, Eli!"

"I...I can't Hannah!" Eli descended quickly, landed on the first dark street she could find in one of the small villages that dotted the area, and unsnapped her. "I have to find Oskar. They'll kill him if I don't find him. And I don't have the right to put your life in danger. Your family would never forgive me. Tell Mama. She'll come get you." She disappeared into the night sky, leaving Hannah standing alone in front of an old church in the middle of nowhere.

"Eli! Please!" But she was gone.

Jack! Eli's gone.

Where Hannah? Where did she go? Where are you?"

I don't know, Jack. To Manchester, I think. And I don't know where I am. Eli just...left me here. She squinted at the church sign. There's a church here called "St. Anne's," surrounded by an old cemetery, and across the street a sign that says, "St. Anne's Vale." She saw a small sign over the entrance to a low, grey-stone building. I ...think I'm in a town called Brown Edge.

Go to the church, Hannah. Find somewhere you can stay until we can get someone to get you home. Perhaps Elaine can...

No, Jack. I'm going after Eli. I can't let her go alone. She needs me whether she knows it or not. She crossed the street and hopped the fence to the cemetery, where it was a bit darker. She certainly didn't want anyone to see her bumbling attempts at flying, but she had to do this. She moved quickly up the hill, threading her way past the ancient tombstones until she stood in the shadow of the old church.

Hannah, please don't! We can't lose you both! He was frantic.

I'm sorry, Jack. I have to do this. She took off her jacket and sweater, tied them around her waist, and thought about Eli and how much she loved her—and how beautiful her wings had looked that night in the Oak tree when they fled over Richie Johnson's House. She raised her arms, and suddenly, with a soft crackle, her wings were there.

She stood at the top of the hill for a moment, trying to put her disastrous flight out of her mind, then leaned forward just as Eli had done. She stumbled, caught herself, tried again and again without success, and finally slumped to the ground in despair. The fear was too much for her; she simply couldn't do it.

Finally, with her arms wrapped around herself and her pearl-white wings draped loosely around her shoulders like those of a fallen angel, she sobbed quietly in the darkness.

Hannah, Elaine's on her way. Please, just stay where you are. Jonathan and I are bringing the plane to Liverpool. Your Family will meet us there. If we can't get Dr. Dawson and Oskar out soon, we'll all have to come to the island without them. Once we're all safe here, we'll decide what to do next. Once you're in the air with Elaine, you can try to persuade Eli to come with us, but I frankly don't think you'll be able to do that. Just as importantly, you can let us know Oskar's status, and how Dr. Dawson is holding up. We'll make our final decision as to what to do, based on what you can tell us.

...Okay, Jack. I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!

Whatever for? This isn't your fault, Hannah. In fact, it's a godsend that you couldn't fly. You'll be much more of a help to Eli and the others if you're safe with us, and able to let us know where everyone is and what they're thinking. In fact, it's probably the only chance we have to get them back!

You're right Jack. I knew it in my heart, but I just couldn't...not try.

Of course you couldn't Hannah. Now put your sweater and jacket back on before you freeze to death. He could already feel her shivering in the cold night air.

He saw the questioning look on his mother's face. "She's safe, Mom. She's safe! She couldn't fly." He felt an overwhelming sense of relief, followed by an overwhelming urge to reach across all those miles and just snatch her up and keep her safe and comfort her for her perceived failure to help Eli. *She takes too much on herself. How can I ever get that across to her?* But Jack knew it was impossible. Hannah was so unassuming, so naturally giving, that she would only be confused and uncomfortable if he told her what he really thought. *Perhaps if she could see herself through my eyes for just a moment, she'd understand...*

"One down, three to go!" Maggie grinned at him.

He grinned back, grabbed his jacket and headed for the tarmac.

Hannah was overwhelmed. She knew she shouldn't have eavesdropped, but she couldn't bear waiting in the dark all alone with her thoughts. And she knew Jack had warned her not to do it. "Someday you may not like what you hear," he had said.

She stood up, head in the clouds, spread her wings one last time and leaned into the light breeze as it topped the hill and whispered softly through the arched gateway in the ancient wall behind her. She spun around slowly, feeling the subtle pressure of the wind as it gently played across her wings. She sighed happily, folded them away, and slowly dressed herself. Finally, she sat down on the damp grass, leaned back against the wall, and waited for Eli's mama to come for her.

Please, Jack. Hurry! Eli needs you!

We're on our way Hannah. And so is Elaine.

§

The old priest stood at the lower gate, transfixed. He steadied himself on the old gate frame, and peered into the darkness at the top of the hill. Had he really seen what he thought he had seen? Or was his mind playing tricks on him? Or, perhaps, it was wishful thinking at this late stage of his life. He knew then that this was how many of the old legends were born, which, if they stood the test of time, blossomed into miracles. He had been with the Parish since he was 25 years old. His current parishioners' parents had been children when he gave his first sermon. He knew if he told them what he had seen, they would believe him.

He began the slow walk up the hill to the church, still undecided; still unsure of the significance of what he had seen. Perhaps it was only an old sheet, or a piece of discarded clothing caught on a bush. The whole thing might be nothing at all. But he decided he had to know. He had to be sure.

He was only halfway up the hill when he heard it. The singing. A girl's beautiful voice, or perhaps a young boy's, singing softly in the darkness near the gate, where the angel had stood only moments before. He didn't recognize the song at first; all he knew for certain was that it wasn't English. The wind played with it, first blowing parts of it away, then tantalizing him with its crystal clarity and sweet melody, until he suddenly recognized it – a song his mother had sung to him when he was a small child. It had been over 60 years since he had heard it last. His mother had died soon after he had become a priest. He had never forgiven himself for not having been with her at the end, but she had gone home to Sweden after his father died in the war, and the cancer had taken her quickly – and he had been in denial until it was too late. As an only child, he had found his solace in the church and his congregation, and over the years, they had paid him back a thousand-fold with their love and respect.

He stood there quietly, mouthing the familiar words as they softly floated down the hill like tiny crystal bells, until finally, the last of them were carried away by the gentle wind. He knew now that this was his own, personal miracle; perhaps a sign that he had been forgiven. It would take him a long time to fully understand what it meant, and why it had happened on this particular night, but it was not a miracle he could share with anyone.

He was not one of those who believed in conventional miracles anyway; in his view, God's universe was too beautifully organized and balanced for that. But he believed firmly in the miracles of chance; in those seemingly random happenings that sometimes converged at the right place and the right time and, in a perfect storm of coincidences, caused something wonderful to happen within one's soul. And part of the miracle was in the not knowing why or how.

Reluctantly, he turned away from the narrower path to the gate and continued up the hill to the church, where he lit a candle in memory of his mother and a mother's love – and mourned for the foolishness of her only child.

Chapter 37: The Great Escape

Oskar sat quietly at the desk, weighing his options. Hannah knew where he was. Somehow she had been able to reach out to him; at least long enough to let him see the attack on Dad and the threat made against him. But, no matter how much noise he had made, no one came. Why? There must be no cameras or recorders. Otherwise, someone would have come, if only to restrain him.

He had also decided that the geometry of the room had to be the reason he couldn't talk to anyone. So he had to change it.

He grabbed the bedframe and, with a bit of effort, slid it several feet away from the wall. He crouched down, grabbed one of the pyramids firmly and tried to pull it free, but it wouldn't budge. He braced himself against the bedframe and kicked it hard. First, it bent; then with a second kick, it snapped off at the base. He made short work of six of them in the same manner, stuffed them under his mattress, then shoved his head into the hole he had created.

Dad? Can you hear me?

Oskar! Are you okay? Has anyone come to see you today? Where are you?

I'm not sure, Dad. But my room looks nothing like yours. He showed him his room, and told him what he had done.

You guessed right, Oskar. And good work. Now back away from the hole. Let's see how far away you can move before we can no longer communicate.

Within a few minutes, they realized that he could talk anywhere in the room now. He needn't be near the hole at all. It was as though some sort of barrier had been broken and somehow the medium that carried his thoughts (whatever it was) had poured through the hole and filled up the room. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Dr. Dawson had to smile at the thought.

Oskar quickly pushed his bed back toward the wall, covering the hole. *Dad? How's your hand?*

It's fine Oskar. In fact, it's begun to heal already. I may not have my strength, but the healing still seems to work, after a fashion. But it presents a problem for us, because they'll notice it soon. And that won't be good. But Oskar, you're in real danger. Adrian may go after you to get me to help him, even though I've told him I would cooperate. I think he has another agenda; one I haven't figured out yet. Promise me that when he comes in, you'll do whatever he asks, and you'll tell him whatever he wants to know. But he's inhumanly sadistic, so be careful.

I know, Dad. Hannah showed me. I'll be okay. I promise.

Oskar, I...I'm sorry. If I had reacted faster at home, we might have avoided all this.

No, Dad. They had me first. There was nothing you could have done. Besides, Hannah knows where I am now. Eli will come, and she'll save us both.

I hope you're right, Oskar. But he knew Eli, as determined as she was, wouldn't be able to outwit Adrian.

Oskar turned at the sound of the door opening. He was just barely able to flop down on the bed before Adrian strode into the room, sat down at the desk, and placed his briefcase on the floor next to the chair. "Hello, Oskar. I'd like to introduce myself. I'm..."

Oskar took a deep breath. "I know. You're Adrian. You hurt my father. And I have absolutely no intention of cooperating with you, no matter what you think you're going to do to me."

§

Eli circled the complex several times before she realized how stupid she had been. She was now blind. She had no idea where they were. If she had dropped Hannah off nearby, she'd at least be able to guide her. But, on the other hand, she also knew Hannah. She wouldn't have stood for it. She would have insisted on coming with her. She sighed. *Back to the drawing board.* She would have to rely on herself.

Frustrated, she circled once more, then landed in an alley a block from the main entrance. She moved slowly toward the gate, staying in the shadows as best she could. At least she had her eyes, and she had already counted two guards in the kiosk and two more in the shadows next to the fence, all armed.

She took a deep breath, stepped out of the shadows and strode purposefully toward the gate, but a huge beefy hand reached out of the blackness of a recessed store entrance, grabbed her firmly by the shoulder and jerked her off her feet into the narrow entryway.

"Hello, Angel. This really wasn't the best plan you could come up with was it?"

"Sava!" A wave of relief washed over her. "They've hurt Papa! They're going to take out Oskar's eye. They..."

"Shhh! I know, Eli. Why else do you think I'm here? I heard Hannah too."

"Where? Where were you, Sava? We've been looking for you for days!"

"I'm sorry Eli. I had business in Sunderland, some of it a bit unexpected. And I didn't want your father talking me out of it."

"You were in Sunderland? And you heard Hannah?" Eli couldn't believe it. No wonder she had been able to talk to Oskar. He could have been in the center of the Earth and Hannah would have found him. "What do we do now, Sava? How do we rescue Oskar and Papa?"

“You’re staying right here. I’ll get them out. Since they don’t know I exist...yet, I still have the element of surprise, at least for a few more hours. They’re expecting you, and probably Elaine. They’re not expecting the real thing.”

“No! I’m not! I didn’t come all this way to stand by while someone else saves them. And even you can’t do it alone.”

“And yet, you were planning on doing it alone. What on Earth were you intending to do, Eli? Talk your way in? They have your description. Depending on how trigger-happy any one of the four over there might be, they might have killed you. Don’t you realize your fame precedes you?” He deeply regretted not staying in touch with them at what turned out to be such a critical time. Having all this dumped on him by Hannah, just as he was feeling so proud of himself for acquiring the DVDs, was a huge ego-deflating event for him. He knew that if he had been nearby, no one would have been taken.

“I...was going to demand that they take me to Adrian. I’ve met men like him before. He wouldn’t be able to resist trying to get the better of me. And then he’d take me to Oskar. And I would have rescued him.”

“Eli, don’t you understand? It’s you and your mama he wants. And if you had survived the gate, you would have given yourself to him. And your mama would then have no choice but to come for you. And then, it would have been over. These people don’t take prisoners. If you understood their history, you’d know that.”

“I’m sorry, Sava.” She hesitated, “but wouldn’t they want you even more? After all, you’re the...‘real thing.’” Her eyes sparkled.

He smiled at her. “All those years we watched over you while you slept, protected you, and kept you safe, Gudmund and I never imagined what a handful you would finally become. You were much more agreeable when you were twelve—and asleep.” He took her in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. “They will never have me. And they will never have you either. I swear this to you.”

“I’m going with you, Sava.”

“Yes. I believe you are.” Sava took her by the hand, and together they moved quietly away from the gate.

§

Hannah stood up quickly as soon as she heard the sound of wings. *Mrs. Dawson!* She pulled her cap down over her ears and started down the hill.

I’m here, Hannah. She stepped out of the shadow of the garage and waved at her.

They met halfway up the hill. Hannah rushed into her arms. “I’m so sorry! Eli and I kind of made a mess of things, didn’t we? She’s gone, and I’ve taken a lot of your time away from more important things!”

“No, Hannah. You ARE one of the important things. We simply can’t do this without you.”

“Mrs. Dawson! You have a harness!” she quickly stepped behind her and clipped herself to the heavy metal loop.

“I got it for Rich, Hannah. Before he got the injection.”

Hannah giggled. “I would have liked to have seen that.”

“You still may get a chance, Hannah. He still flies like a baby bird. It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks.” Elaine finished off a small bottle of Ejuice and readjusted her pack to accommodate her. “Ready?”

“Ready!” She put her arms around Elaine’s neck and held tight. Elaine leaped into the air, banked right over the lower gate and gained altitude rapidly.

“Wow! You’re really fast!” Suddenly, Jack was there. *Hanna! Elaine! We’ll be in Liverpool in about 20 minutes, but I think you’re close enough now so we will be able to communicate from ground level from now on. Have you heard from Eli or Oskar yet?*

No, Jack. We just left Brown Edge. We’re going to fly much higher, just to make sure. We’re pretty close to Manchester anyway, so I should be able to hear...

HANNAH!! For a second, she thought Oskar was having a heart attack. Then all she could see was copper spikes all around her, and a man with cold blue-gray eyes staring down at her. Then, as she floated higher in the room, she saw Oskar, a black hood over his head, spread-eagled across the bed, covered with blood.

§

Adrian stared at Oskar a moment, then sat back in the chair, momentarily taken aback by his brashness. “Well, then. We should get right to business then, shouldn’t we?” He intensely disliked being made a fool of. It wasted his time. “Why would you damage the integrity of your room when you were fully capable of communicating without doing so?”

Damn! He does have cameras. “I just wanted to keep you guessing. And to show you that you didn’t know everything.”

Adrian smiled at him. “I would have expected a bit more maturity from a 27-year-old man. But then, you’re really just a 27-year-old little boy, aren’t you?” he said, derisively. “But, even as an old ‘boy,’ you must understand what I’m planning on doing to you don’t you?”

“More or less.” It was getting harder for Oskar to keep up the false bravado.

Oskar! What are you up to? I told you to cooperate! He means business. Dawson’s left hand began to throb. He realized he had reflexively clenched both fists.

“Would you like us to bring your father in, so he can watch?”

“No!” Oskar was worried now. Was he really going to hurt him? “Why are you doing this? Dad said he would do whatever you asked.”

“He did, didn’t he? But then, there are the others. I feel the need to reach out to them, to assure them that I mean business also. For all I know, your father folded so easily simply because he’s taken on the role of your father, and consequently, is unrepresentative of the strengths of the others, who don’t have a similar handicap—or may not be entirely convinced yet. And, now that I can safely assume that you are in communication with them, action speaks much louder than words.”

The door opened, and two burly men came in, one carrying a small ice chest. “Jules! Good to see you again! It’s been a while. How’s the wife?”

“Doing just fine, sir.”

“Take him!” The men moved rapidly across the room and grabbed Oskar before he could react. Despite all his attempts to resist, they quickly stripped off his clothing, then one pulled a black hood over his head while the other tied his arms and legs to the bed frame.

As terrified as he was, all Oskar could think about was his eyes. *At least they’re not going to take an eye.* The memories of that night at the pool came back to him vividly.

Oskar! You have to find Hannah or Eli. They need to know where we are and what’s happening.

I’m trying, Dad! I’m trying!

“Now then, Oskar. Where to start?” Oskar heard the chair scraping the floor as Adrian slid it over next to the bed. “I’ve often wondered about some of the vampire legends, about the effects of holy water, garlic, crosses, and other religious accoutrements. Now that we know that vampires exist and that you are at least a close relative, I couldn’t resist doing a bit of experimentation. Let’s try a few of these out first.”

Oskar jerked as he felt something cold press against his chest. “Nope! As I strongly suspected, a cross does nothing. Next...” He jerked again as Adrian tossed a cup of ice cold water between his legs. “Well! Fortunately for your male appurtenances, Oskar, holy water is also ineffective. Too bad! You can’t imagine how difficult it was for me to acquire it.”

Oskar heard the click of the latch as Adrian opened his briefcase. “Enough of this! We all know it’s just religious nonsense anyway, don’t we? I’ll dispense with the garlic, and go straight for the

more interesting and practical legends, some of the ones that concerned us in the first place. You know; like the ability to heal, and the ability to endure pain. For logistical reasons, we won't test out your super-strength today."

He felt the prick of the knife against his chest. "Just so you know, Oskar. I'm fully aware that you need the catalyst to reach your full...potential, let us say. Unfortunately, we don't have any. But we do have the next best thing, and we are absolutely certain that it works. Here, I'll give you just a bit, a taste, and we'll try it out."

Oskar felt a straw press against his lips. In desperation, he raised his head and sucked hard, hoping he'd get enough of whatever it was to regain some of his strength. He reflexively gagged when he tasted the blood. He spit it out, gagged again, then jerked hard on the ropes, trying to free himself. He could feel the blood running down the side of his face.

"Well, now. Who would've guessed?" He winked at Jules. "This complicates matters significantly. You see, I'm going to do this. I have no choice. But if you can't drink the blood you won't be able to heal, will you? Too bad. But at least we can test your determination to stay alive, can't we? You either drink the blood, or you bleed to death. It'll be your choice."

Oskar! Tell him you want me to watch!

No, Dad, I won't...

Oskar, when they bring me over, I might be able to look out a window, or get some sort of sense as to where we are. That way, if Eli or Hannah...

Okay, Dad.

"Please! I want my Dad! Please?" He didn't have to pretend he was afraid. His trembling voice betrayed his fear.

"Just a boy after all, eh?" He nodded to Jules. "Go get him."

Oskar felt a prick over his right breast. "In the meantime..."

Oskar felt the knife slice into his chest and move relentlessly down to the left and across his abdomen. He screamed in terror; not so much because it hurt--and it did--but because he knew what a wound like that could mean.

§

Eli stumbled and fell against Sava, grabbed his arm, and pulled herself upright. "He's killing him!" she hissed. She leaped in the air, but Sava grabbed her by the ankle and pulled her back down beside him.

“Listen! Don’t fly off half-cocked; listen to Hannah,” he scolded. “We need to fly along the perimeter of the warehouse complex. We need to be able to recognize anything your Papa may see out a window on the way to Oskar. It’s our only hope.” Eli followed him into the air over the complex, where they circled in tight spirals, waiting

Oskar! I’m here! Sava’s here! Mama and Hannah are coming! We’ll get you out, I promise!

Eli, they’re taking me up some stairs!

Papa!

Sava interrupted. *What kind of stairs, Dr. Dawson? Concrete or steel?*

Concrete first. Now steel.

How many flights?

On the second from my original level, but the first steel flight.

Okay. You were probably in the first basement. You’re headed for the second floor now. Eli, go right and circle that two-story warehouse to the east. I’ll take this one. He veered off sharply to the right.

Hannah! Mama! Are you there? Of course you are, otherwise...

Sava interrupted her, impatiently. *Concentrate, Eli! Oskar’s life may depend on it. Check out all the windows on the second floor near the stairwell windows. They’ll be narrower than the others. One set at each end of each building, and one somewhere near the center.*

Sorry, Sava! She looked down the long row of identical 2-story warehouses and her heart sank. She just knew they’d never find them.

This doesn’t seem to be a warehouse at all, Sava. It’s too nicely finished. It’s more like a research facility; clean, white walls, and heavy on the utilities. And we’ve just turned a corner...The building seems to be roughly square, as near as I can tell. We’re walking along a corridor along an outside wall, with many large windows on our right and doors at regular intervals on the left, with small reinforced-glass windows in them, almost like classroom doors—or lab doors.

Sava scanned the complex quickly, looking for a roof with a higher concentration of HVAC equipment and power lines. *There!* Near the back of the complex, he spotted a large, square building with several tall antennae on the roof, as well as what appeared to be a large machine room.

Eli, I can just make out the steeple of an impressive church in the distance.

Eli looked past Sava, who was already descending toward the roof. *There, Papa! It's Manchester Cathedral. You're on the South side of the building!*

Eli! Stay back! Sava dropped quickly just below the roof line, glided silently in the dark shadow of the building, then rose up over the parapet and dropped like a hawk. Eli heard a muffled scream, then silence. Sava's dark form moved rapidly across the roof and disappeared behind the machine room. He emerged seconds later, dragging a second body behind him. He hid both of them behind a ventilation shaft and quickly went through their pockets.

Okay, Eli. He slipped a keycard in the machine room door and eased it open.

She landed next to him and glanced toward the ventilation shaft. "Sava? Did you..."

He put his finger to his lips. "Wait here." He slipped inside.

§

"Well, Oskar? Where is everyone now? Have any of them arrived in Manchester yet?"

Oskar was breathing heavily, but the shock had subsided to the point where he fully realized he was no longer alone and his Eli was close by. It was all he needed to know. There were so many different voices in his head right now, he was overwhelmed. *Thank you, Hannah!*

You're welcome, Oskar.

"I know a plane left the island over an hour ago, but hasn't as yet arrived here. I believe Hannah and her family have boarded a plane for Liverpool, so they're out of the picture. But Eli? No one's seen hide nor hair of her. And we've just had a mysterious theft in Sunderland, but frankly, I really don't think that's her style. I'll stop now if you feel the slightest inclination to reveal her itinerary to me. Or else..." Adrian pressed the tip of the knife against Oskar's left nipple.

Oskar, I...Eli began.

Sava interrupted. *Eli! Describe to Oskar in detail the layout of the front gate and the position of the guards.*

Oskar listened carefully, then took a deep breath. "Okay, Okay! I'll tell you! Just....stop. Please" He heard the door open.

"Oskar! My God, there's blood everywhere!" Papa rushed across the room, but was brought up short by Jules.

"Patience, Doctor. Not until..." Adrian increased the pressure on the knife just a bit.

"She's outside the front gate!"

“Why should I believe you?”

“There are two men by the gate, and two other guys behind the cinderblock fence. I can see them. One is about 6 feet tall; the other is short and stocky. They’re both carrying big rifles.” Oskar concentrated as best he could, but he was acutely aware of his own blood running, unabated, down his sides and soaking into the sheets.

“Thank you, Oskar! Where is she exactly?”

“... near the furniture store, across the street.”

Adrian nodded to Jules, who quickly stepped out of the room, phone to his ear. He was back in less than a minute.

“Is she still there Oskar? Or has she been privy to our little exchange?”

“No, she’s...”

From her position on the roof, Eli could see the entire row of shops on the other side of the distant street suddenly bathed in bright light. A split-second later, she heard a spatter of gunfire. Sava gently nudged her into the machine room.

Oskar jerked hard, just as Dr. Dawson pressed a towel against his jagged wound. He screamed in pain, then felt his dad’s hands on his shoulders, forcing him to be still.

“Well! Judging from your reaction, I suspect we’ve at least caught her by surprise. What say you, Oskar? Is she still there?”

“Damn it! Leave him alone! He’s just a boy!”

“But that’s just it, Doctor. He isn’t. Any more than you’re just a man.” He nodded toward his hand. “You think we’re stupid? You shouldn’t even be able to move that hand, let alone hold him down with it. Your research is even more interesting than I had thought. And we absolutely have to have it.”

They’re here, Papa! They’re all here.

Hannah unclipped herself the instant they landed on the roof. Elaine motioned her towards the machine room door, and they cautiously slipped inside, where Hannah immediately grabbed Eli and hugged her. Sava glanced up, then quickly closed the door to the janitor’s closet.

“I want you two to keep watch from the roof. Elaine and I will get Richard and Oskar, and meet you here. Eli will carry Hannah, Elaine will carry Oskar, and I will carry Dr. Dawson, at least until we’re safely away.” Sava nodded at Elaine. “Is that satisfactory?”

“No! I’m going to get Oskar.” Eli started for the stairs.

“That wasn’t a request, Eli.” Sava stepped in front of her.

Her eyes became golden slits. “I’m going to kill him,” she hissed. “He deserves to die!”

“Adrian is what he is. Whether he lives or dies is unimportant in the overall scheme of things, Eli. Your Papa and Oskar on the other hand...” Sava grabbed her firmly by the wrist.

Eli struggled, but she knew it was no use. After all, Sava was the ‘Real Thing.’

Eli! Please! Do what he says!

But Oskar, I want...

You know he’s right Eli.

She stopped struggling and looked down at her feet. “Okay, Sava”

But it wasn’t okay.

Sava quickly positioned Eli and Hannah at opposite corners of the building, then headed down the stairs with Elaine. “How’s your strength holding up?” he whispered.

“I’m fine. I have several small bottles of Ej Juice in my pack, but Oskar is probably going to need them all.”

“Save one for yourself and Eli. We’ve got a long flight ahead of us.” He put his ear to the door, then opened it carefully.

Elaine heard a soft thump and the sound of bones breaking, then stepped back as Sava dragged a man into the stairwell and tossed him in the corner. He reached out into the corridor, grabbed a rifle off the floor and tossed it in the corner with him.

“Sava, did you really have to...”

“You do your job; I’ll do mine,” he snapped. “We’re not sitting around a table discussing ethics in the abstract. This is real. Your husband’s and your son’s lives are at stake.” He slipped out into the corridor and motioned for her to follow him.

Jules stepped out in the corridor and retreated quickly back into the room, gun drawn. “I think we may have a problem, sir. The guard at the corner is gone. And I can’t raise him.”

“Really! Oskar? Where’s Eli now?” but he knew something was wrong. She would be incapable of any sort of coordinated attack, and with guards doubled and sometimes even tripled, it would be the only way to get this close. And in any case, who would she coordinate with? Everyone but

Elaine was accounted for, and his profiler had assured him she didn't have the ability to mastermind a plan that could get them this close.

Dawson shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Adrian spotted the subtle gesture and moved quickly over to the bed. "Jules, shut the door please. Frank, take the doctor." He put the knife to Oskar's throat. Jules slammed the heavy metal door shut and punched in a number on the keypad. Frank jerked Dawson off the bed and pinned his arms behind his back.

"Tell them I have a knife to your throat Oskar. And be sure to let them know that, if I have nothing to lose, I'll most certainly use it. Jules?"

"They're on their way, sir."

"Good!" He relaxed just a bit. "Now, doctor. Whoever's out there has less than three minutes to extract Oskar and yourself. I wish you luck."

"Eli, they've locked the door, Adrian has a knife to my throat, Jules is next to the door with his gun drawn and 'Frank' has Dad's arms pinned behind him, a gun to his back, and is standing next to the desk." *Thanks for that, Hannah.* It had been hard for him to sort out all the voices, but Sava's instructions to Hannah and himself had been quite clear: keep Adrian off-balance.

Adrian felt his control of the situation slipping away from him. *Another unknown variable. We've become too complacent; too confident in our successes...* He jerked the hood off, grabbed Oskar firmly by the hair and tilted his head back. "Can they see this too, Oskar?"

The wall next to the door disintegrated in an explosion of glittering copper pyramids, which clattered and bounced across the copper floor in a cacophony of sound and light. Sava jerked the gun out of Jules' hand and twisted his head off at almost the same instant. His body hit the floor like a felled tree, further scattering myriads of copper pyramids. Simultaneously, Elaine lunged through the gap, caught Adrian by the neck and threw him across the room like a rag doll. She snapped the ropes, wrapped Oskar up in the sheet and carried him back through the gap in the wall.

Frank threw Dawson aside and pumped six rounds into Sava as he strode across the room toward him. He fired several more into the ceiling as Sava sank his fangs into his neck.

Back against the spiked wall, Adrian watched everything unfold before his eyes in slow-motion. The breath had been knocked completely out of him and he couldn't move a muscle.

"Tend to Oskar, Doctor! I can take care of myself."

Dawson followed quickly after Elaine.

Sava threw what was left of Frank on the bed and turned to Adrian, golden eyes blazing. “Their blood is on your hands, for what that’s worth to you. And after your superiors review the surveillance videos of our ‘close encounter,’ clearly demonstrating how your arrogance, incompetence, and complacency led directly to this disaster, I doubt you’ll be much of a factor in our future dealings with the club.”

He smiled at him, walked deliberately past the gaping hole in the wall, jerked the heavy copper door off its hinges, and strode confidently down the hallway to the outer corridor.

Adrian was certain now that he had met his first true Vampire. And he simply had to have him. He pulled himself up on the bed, caught his breath, then stumbled toward the door, picking up Jules’ rifle on the way.

§

By the time Sava reached the machine room, Oskar had already been fed. Elaine had bound his chest with strips of his bloody sheet, and Eli had his head in her lap. “Is he stable, Elaine? We need to get moving.” He ripped a small emergency generator off its mounts and wedged it tightly against the stairwell door.

“Papa, is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine now, Eli. Help me get him to his feet.”

As soon as he was upright, Elaine carefully strapped Richard’s harness on him. Eli clipped him to Elaine, and helped them both out the door onto the roof. “I love you Oskar,” she whispered.

He took her hand and smiled at her. *Me too, Eli.* Elaine spread her wings and leaped over the parapet.

They heard the sound of automatic rifle fire, and watched nervously as Elaine spiraled back over the roof, circling until she gained enough altitude to safely head west toward Liverpool.

“Eli, you and Hannah do the same. You’re not fast enough to evade gunfire. As soon as you’re high enough, fly with your mother. I’ll be along as soon as you lift off.” Eli leaped into the air and began the slow climb to altitude, never taking her eyes off Sava and Papa until they were airborne. They were high enough now to be seen by several groups of men below in the courtyard, who began firing at them sporadically.

Sava leaped off the south side of the building and swooped down almost to ground level as the men scrambled to get out of the way. Then he banked sharply to the north between two rows of warehouses, completely out of the line of fire. It had happened so suddenly that not a single shot had been fired.

Hannah laughed gleefully. *Sava, that was amazing!*

Eli turned briefly to the south to get a better view, and spotted Adrian as he stepped out on the roof from the north stairway, rifle in hand.

Eli, get your butt out of there! This isn't a game! Sava was furious.

Sorry, Sava! She brought herself up short, hung in the air for a second, then banked tightly to the north and began her slow upward climb again.

She felt Hannah jerk, then go limp on her back. And suddenly she was gone. She heard the sharp crack of the rifle a second later.

Chapter 38: Hannah's Reward

"Hannah!" Eli screamed. She heard another bullet whiz by her head and redoubled her efforts, but Hannah was dead weight now, making it much more difficult to maneuver. They had flown together now so often that she hadn't realized how adept Hannah had become at sensing Eli's proprioception, and adjusting her weight distribution accordingly, but her weight was all that was left of her now as far as Eli could tell.

Everyone had turned back now. She could sense Oskar trying desperately to feel Hannah; to get into her head somehow, but he also knew that Hannah was the only one of them that could accomplish that feat.

Eli, is she...

I don't know Oskar... She found a weak updraft, hung in the air for a moment, and held her breath. She willed her heart rate down to a few beats per minute, and felt desperately for another heartbeat. Nothing! She leaned her head back, pressed her cheek against Hannah's and...there it was.

Joy washed over her, followed immediately by a deep sense of shame. *This is my fault Oskar. Sava, I'm sorry! I've let you all down. I've almost killed her!* She knew now how Hannah must have felt when *Den Sjätte* and the others took Jason away instead of her that night. Suddenly her joy turned to terror as she felt the wetness on her cheek and tasted the blood.

Eli! Follow us! Suddenly, Sava and Papa were there just off her left wing. She could see Mama and Oskar rise up below her.

There! Sava dove rapidly down toward a small lake in the center of what appeared to be a large park. The others followed close behind him.

Papa unhooked Hannah, laid her gently on the grass next to the lake, and grabbed her wrist. He gently turned her head to the side, and breathed a sigh of relief. "The bullet took a huge chunk out of her right ear, but the bleeding has almost stopped. It just grazed her skull on the way by."

Sava hurried to her side with a wet cloth. "I'll do it, Sava." Dawson took the cloth and gently cleaned off the side of her face, then watched in amazement as the gap closed before his eyes, and her ear became whole again. And suddenly, Jack and Jonathan were with them once more. Hannah was clearly regaining consciousness.

Jack! Can you see this?!

Yes, Doctor! Eli could sense the elation in Jack's voice. She knew that, up until that moment, he hadn't known if she was even alive. His relief was palpable. *She's absolutely amazing!*

Hannah opened her eyes and grinned up at them. *I am, aren't I?*

Hannah, why did it heal so rapidly? Did Elaine give you Ejuice?

No, Jack. I wanted it to, so it did.

Elaine looked at Rich and winked. “Maybe Gudmund was right after all,” she whispered. She gently placed her hand on Oskar’s forehead. “Are you feeling better, Oskar?” she handed him another bottle of Ejuice.

Eli giggled as Hannah’s ears continued to grow. They didn’t stop until they had reached their full pixie glory.

Hannah, how many times do I have to tell you...

What, Jack? What?! She wiggled her ears at him defiantly.

“Enough! We need to get moving! I have to meet someone near Liverpool in less than an hour.” Sava shook out his wings. “Coming, Doctor?”

“Maybe I’ll try it on my own, Sava.”

“No you won’t, Rich. Not until we’re safely on the island,” Elaine admonished him. “We have enough to worry about already.”

“Who are you going to meet, Sava?” Eli ran her fingers lightly along the edge of his wing.

Sava smiled at her. “You’ll see soon enough.”

“I’m hungry!” Hannah poked around in Elaine’s pack and triumphantly pulled out a couple of candy bars. “Mrs. Dawson? Can I...”

“Of course, Hannah. I brought them just for you.”

“Want a bite, Oskar?” She stuck the mangled end of her candy bar in his face.

“Sure!” He took a big bite, then a swig of Ejuice. “Thankth, Hannah.”

“You’re welcome, Oskar.” She kissed him on the cheek. “I like your outfit.”

Oskar blushed and readjusted what was left of the sheet, “Hannah, you simply have to stop doing that.”

“I simply have to? Well, that settles it, then.” She took off her wool sweater. “You look cold in your toga, Oskar. Why don’t you put this on?”

“But then you’ll be cold.”

“Not as long as I have this.” She held up what was left of the second candy bar and grinned at him. “And you can even have my shirt too!” She began unbuttoning it.

“Please Oskar, put it on!” Eli insisted. “You can have mine, too. She untied it from around her waist. “And my pants.” She unbuckled her belt.

“Enough! I’ll be fine just as I am. Please....” He backed away from them slowly.

“Gotcha!” They both doubled over in laughter.

“You’re way too easy, Oskar.” Hannah was laughing so hard, she had tears in her eyes.

Sava rolled his eyes. “Ready, Doctor?” He made sure Dawson had a good solid grip, then leaped into the air, flew low across the field and rose up rapidly before the tree line.

Elaine secured Oskar’s harness and followed quickly behind, circled once over the lake until she saw that Eli and Hannah were in the air, then dropped in behind them.

“Well, what do you think, Sava? Have you gotten used to being part of a family yet?”

“I hadn’t given it a thought, Doctor. My family’s been dead for over 300 years, murdered by others of my kind.”

“Come now, Sava. I’ve seen the way you look after the children. And we all know what they think of you; especially after tonight.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Doctor.”

“Well, when you finally figure it out, you’ll always be welcome in our home – with or without an invitation. And if that arouses your curiosity, you can discuss that interesting phenomenon with Eli.”

They flew on in silence for a few minutes; then Sava expressed his personal regrets for Hannah’s injuries and began quietly discussing his plans for Adrian’s future. He found a sympathetic ear.

§

With Sava still in the lead, they flew along the outskirts of Liverpool and, after verifying that the plane had landed, moved silently over the industrial area near the airport until suddenly Sava dropped between two large warehouses, and landed next to a black van parked in the shadows.

“Sava! We were so worried!” Janice threw open the door and rushed up to him. Ryan opened the back of the van and dragged two black duffle bags out onto the ground.

“Ryan!” Eli unbuckled Hannah and gave him a big hug. For the first time she noticed the petite, dark-haired girl standing next to Sava. “Janice?” she cocked her head questioningly. “Ryan told us all about you.”

“You must be Eli. And you’re really pretty, even though I can still see the boy in you.”

“Janice!” Ryan admonished her. “Maybe she doesn’t...”

Eli laughed. “It’s okay Ryan. I’m glad she knows everything. But you really took a chance, Janice. If I were Hannah, I’m not sure you would have gotten off without a punch on the arm at least.”

“I’d never make that mistake, Eli. I could tell you apart as soon as I saw you.”

“How? Sometimes I can’t even tell them apart.” Oskar was interested now.

“It’s easy, Oskar. Ask your Mom. I bet she can tell too.”

“I must confess, I couldn’t at the beginning, Janice. But you’re right; it’s easy now,” Elaine acknowledged.

“But how?!” Oskar was exasperated.

“It’s the boy in her, Oskar. It’s in the way she moves, in the way she holds her head. It’s just so obvious!” she grinned at him. “But maybe boys just don’t notice those things,” Janice teased. “Especially boys in love.”

“I think she’s right, Oskar. I still can’t tell them apart,” Ryan acknowledged.

“But Hannah is a tomboy too,” Oskar dragged her over next to Eli. “Except for the way she likes to play dress-up sometimes...Ouch!”

“You deserved that, Oskar. I warned you about besmirching my honor.”

“Speaking of playing dress-up, Oskar, nice outfit.” Janice grinned at him. “That is, if you’re planning an afternoon at the Coliseum.”

“Good one, Janice!” Hannah applauded, while Oskar blushed again.

“They’ve got clothes for you on the plane, Oskar.” Hannah reached over and gently took Janice’s hand...and filled her in on the evening’s activities.

“My God! Oskar, I’m so sorry! I didn’t know...” she stammered, “Hannah, how did you do that? I think Sava did that to me too, but not so much...I mean...”

“Take a deep breath and relax, Janice.” Elaine put her arm around her. “No one is offended by what you said; we all know you meant well. And you’ll have to get used to Hannah and Oskar. They’re...quite talented in unusual ways. I guess Sava didn’t have time to fill you in on everything.”

“You two aren’t in any danger by coming are you, Ryan?” Oskar asked.

“I don’t think so. Sava?”

“Not at the moment, Ryan. Did you get the copies made?”

“Yes, sir.” He handed Sava the briefcase. “The first five and the last five. Correct?”

“Spot on, Ryan. Good work!” he handed the briefcase to Dr. Dawson. “This is your passport out of Liverpool. Without it, you’ll never be allowed to leave.”

“But...aren’t you coming with us?” Eli put her arm through his and squeezed tightly.

“I can’t right now, Angel. But I’ll be there before you leave, never fear. We just can’t afford to put all our eggs in one basket.” And for the first time, Sava realized he really did want to go with her; with this petite miracle that he and Gudmund had watched over and kept safe for so long. He felt a deep sadness that his long-time friend and companion wasn’t able to live with his past long enough to see the future he had created for the sweet child they had saved together. And he wondered at the magic she had, in turn, worked on the two of them. He thought about all the dark, empty paths they might have taken, but for Eli. Gudmund had finally given his own life over to her despite the inevitable consequences, and ironically, she had given Sava’s life back to him. And Hannah? Where had she really come from? What did she really mean in the scheme of things? The odds were so against her existence that he was unconvinced that it was mere chance. Only a scientist could delude himself into believing it. No, Gudmund had been right. Hannah WAS Eli, incarnate. She had been created spontaneously from Eli’s own powerful life force, no matter how much Dr. Dawson believed otherwise. A life force so all-encompassing that it had created a loving family out of a man tortured by his self-ascribed guilt over the death of his beloved wife and child, a woman who had been sexually and emotionally abused for over 40 years by a monster and was within days of committing suicide when they first met, and a wimp of a boy who would have either been unceremoniously drowned in a swimming pool, or become a bitter, lonely failure and a drunk, like his father. And there was so much more: Jonathan. The Sandstrøms. The Shaws. The island. And countless other wonderful things, all the result of Eli’s very existence in this world.

“We really should hurry, Doctor. I think you should let Ryan drive you all back to the plane. It’ll save us time, and besides, the logistics for carrying everyone and everything are impossible now. I’ll meet you all the end of the runway after you’ve received clearance.” He grabbed the two duffle bags, slung them across his back, and disappeared into the night.

“Janice, you go ahead and ride up front with Ryan. They’ll recognize you at the gate. We’ll settle in back here.”

Ryan eased the van out of warehouse parking lot. As soon as they were back on the main road, he turned on the headlights and headed for the Archaeogenetics gate. “Well, Janice, what do you think? When we first met, you told me how boring your life was. What do you think now? Or have you bitten off more than you can chew?”

She punched him hard on the arm. “Well, I must admit, your friends all lead very exciting lives, but I’m loving every minute of it all. You, on the other hand, now seem a bit dull by comparison.” She winked at Hannah.

He put his hand to his heart. “Janice, you’ve wounded me deeply. And here I thought you were madly in love with me because I’m such a great musician.”

“You’re not bad, but I wouldn’t want to be with you everywhere.”

“Hmm...Aside from the obvious reference to an old Fleetwood Mac song, I’m not sure what that means, but I choose to consider it a compliment. ‘Not bad’ is better than I get from my brother. And I promise; I won’t quit my day job – that is if I ever get a decent one.”

“When you’re at that point in your life, Ryan, talk to Jonathan. He’s quite resourceful in that area,” Dr. Dawson assured him. “And you too, Janice.”

Ryan was suddenly quite happy he had stumbled upon them in Hannah’s meadow, despite the terrible circumstances. Nothing in his life had been the same since that day. And, if he hadn’t been caught sketching the other-worldly scene he had only half-believed really happened, he might never have gotten to know Janice. They would have likely passed each other by like ‘ships in the night.’

§

Both planes were fueled and ready on the tarmac; the Island Learjet and the charter plane that had brought Ryan and Janice from Sunderland.

Jack and Jason were waiting for them when they pulled up in front of the hangar. “Come here, Hannah,” Jack said, sternly. He turned her around, examined her pixie ear closely, then handed her a bottle of Ejuice. “With your mother’s permission, Hannah.”

“Are...are you sure, Jack?” she hesitated, then gingerly took it from him. Jason felt a bit jealous in spite of his relief that his little sister was now safe and sound, and back with them all.

“I’m sure, your parents are sure, and Jonathan’s sure. You may be suffering from a mild concussion at the very least. And, so far, all your...physical changes and repair work seem to have been conscious efforts on your part. The Ejuice will ensure that you haven’t overlooked anything.”

She grinned at Jason, uncapped the bottle, and hastily drank it down before Jack could change his mind.

Jack put his hand on Ryan's shoulder. "I can't tell you how much we all appreciate the risks you've both taken to bring the DVDs to us safely. Sava entrusted them to you because, as he put it, he couldn't trust anyone else to keep quiet about their contents, especially during the process of copying them. He also said you weren't in any danger from the Builderbriar Club at this point. What's your take on this? Do you feel that you're safe?"

"Except from our parents, I expect. I'm not sure what we can tell them. I hadn't thought that far ahead, but I know mine are going to be quite unhappy with me, once they discover we're gone. I suppose we should call them..."

"Sava's taken care of that, with Jonathan's help. Your parents have both been told by your respective school representatives that you're involved in an exclusive end-of-school celebration, which could keep you away from home until tomorrow. You were apparently picked because of your exemplary grades and extracurricular activities."

Ryan laughed, "And my parents bought it? I'm surprised. I'm sure it didn't fool my brother."

"There were no protests from either of your families. I assure you, Jonathan knows what he's doing."

"I was kind of hoping..."

"I know, Ryan. And once these recordings are safe, and consequently our safety and yours is guaranteed, you'll both be welcome to visit any time, open and above board; you've both more than earned it. But we're not out of danger yet, and we simply can't put the two of you at risk any further tonight. In fact, we're not leaving until your plane is safely away."

"I'm sorry, Ryan. I tried to talk Papa into letting you come, but Jack's right. If something goes wrong and you and Janice were to get hurt because of us, it would be terrible."

"Call me when you're safely on the island, at least. Would you do that?"

Eli kissed him on the cheek. "We will, I promise."

§

Dr. Dawson breathed a sigh of relief as the Charter plane finally lifted off. "One down, one to go," he said, nervously. He paused for a moment at the front of the plane while the pilot secured the door, acutely aware that virtually everyone Eli had gathered together on her long journey out of her personal darkness was aboard this one, small plane. And that included every person critical to the ultimate success of the Archaeogenetics program. He mentally ticked them all off: Eli. Oskar. Elaine. Hannah. Jason. Livia. Nils. Jack. Henry. Jonathan. How had they allowed this to happen? Why had no one realized the significance and possible ramifications of it? He

could only hope it wasn't known to the Builderbriars; if it were, he was sure the DVDs wouldn't stop them from at least detaining them, and perhaps taking them somewhere where they could deal with them all on their own terms.

Eli pressed herself up against Oskar and squeezed him tight. She slipped her hand inside his shirt and gently explored the remnants of the scar that ran from his right breast down almost to his left thigh. "I'm fine, Eli. It's almost gone now."

She laid her head on his shoulder. "I know, Oskar. I just..." she kissed him on the neck. "I thought you were going to die." *Because of me.*

"But I didn't." *Because of you.* He put his arms around her and buried his face in her chest.

Eli smiled at Hannah across the aisle and took her hand. "Thank you for saving Papa and Oskar for me."

"Sava saved them, Eli. Not me."

Eli looked at Papa, saw the concerned look on his face and smiled to herself. *Dear Papa! Always worrying about something.* She looked around her at all the people she loved, and suddenly realized that all of them except Maggie and Sava were here, together with her. Even Einstein. It gave her a warm feeling inside. Henry caught her eye, then winked at her, almost as though he knew what she was thinking.

Jack saw the fire truck pull around the end of the hanger, escorted by two police vehicles and an ambulance with 'HPA' in huge block letters on the side. "Doctor, I think we're in trouble."

"What's going on, Jeff?" Dawson leaned into the cockpit and watched a police van pull up in front of the plane.

Jeff put down his headset. "It looks like we're going to be detained by the Health Protection Agency, at least temporarily. An official with the Builderbriar Conglomerate reported that there may be someone aboard with a highly-communicable disease."

Jack peered out the window. "Yeah, there are two fellows in what looks like Type 4 Hazmat suits heading our way."

"Well it could be worse. At least they're not wearing Type 1. What do we do now, Rich?"

"We cooperate, Elaine. What else CAN we do?"

Chapter 39: Phoenix Rising

Jeff opened the door and dropped the steps when the two figures reached the front of the plane.

Elaine gasped. “It’s Adrian, Rich.” She stared at the heavy flashlight he was carrying and squeezed Rich’s hand tightly. “You don’t suppose...”

“He thinks Sava is aboard,” Rich whispered. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good morning, Doctor. I felt compelled to call in the HPA once I realized you may have unknowingly brought the carrier of a very dangerous disease on board with you.”

“Doctor Richard Dawson? I’m Doctor Ellen Potter. I’m so glad to finally meet you. I’ve read all your books! I deeply apologize for any inconvenience, but Doctor Specter here, with the BbC, thinks you may have a guest on board who may be quite ill.”

“I really can’t imagine why he might think so, but you’re certainly welcome to come aboard and look.” He stepped back and ushered them in. “Everyone aboard is someone known to me personally, including my entire family and many others with whom I have worked professionally for many years.”

“We’ll try not to take up too much of your time, Doctor, but I’m sure you understand our concern.” Adrian slowly walked toward the back of the plane, but it was immediately clear to him that the man he was looking for was not here. He would have recognized him immediately. Still, he raised the flashlight over his head, turned it on, and raked it slowly up and down each aisle, making sure everyone had been struck by the beam.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but Adrian insisted on using the light. Apparently an early symptom of the disease is a sensitivity to sunlight, which could appear before the victim was even aware he was ill. The BbC has designed the light specifically as a diagnostic tool,” Dr. Potter explained.

Adrian trained the light on Eli a second time, held it there for several seconds, then directed it across the aisle at Hannah. Neither of them liked the expression on his face.

“What a beautiful set of twins, Dr. Dawson. You must be so proud. And they look just like their mother!” Dr. Potter exclaimed. Eli and Hannah grinned at Elaine.

“Everyone says that, Doctor Potter. But I think Mama is way prettier than we are.”

“Good answer, child. What’s your name?”

“I’m Eli, Ma’am.”

Dr. Potter winked at her, then went methodically down the aisle, talking briefly with each of them, and jotted down a few notes in her notebook. “What a big dog! Is he friendly?” Without waiting for an answer, she bent down and fluffed Einstein’s fur.

“He likes to be rubbed behind his ears,” Hannah volunteered. She caught Jack grinning at her, read him, and blushed in spite of herself.

With Dr. Potter distracted, Dawson took Adrian firmly by the arm and led him back to the front of the plane. “Before you take this any further, I recommend you take a look at these,” He whispered. He opened the briefcase. “These are just copies, including the film of the critical September, 1936 meeting; the originals and all the disks containing the meetings from then to now are in a safe place. And they will remain safe from the United Nations, the British and American governments, and the press as long as you all back off and leave us alone. Feel free to take it with you. There are plenty more where these came from. And we’re in the process of hiding copies all over the world, just in case your arrogance overcomes your good judgment and you think you can safely get them back.”

“This isn’t over, Doctor. One day, you’ll let your guard down and...”

“You’re alive only because one of us tried to accommodate the wishes of another, against his better judgment. I assure you; you won’t be given that chance again. He is acutely aware of his error in not dispatching you when he had the chance. And now, it’s become personal. And he’s very patient, so I’d watch my back if I were you.”

“What his name?” He knew it really didn’t matter, but he had to know something...anything new about him. He was becoming an obsession.

“He’ll tell you his name when you meet again. And to anticipate your next question, Yes. He’s the real thing. And he’s been alive for a very long time.”

“Dr. Specter! Are you satisfied that the person you’ve been looking for is not aboard?”

“I think so, Dr. Potter.”

“I’ll expect a full report on this man, his origins, and the exact nature of his disease, as soon as you can get it to me. Frankly, I was personally a bit put off by the pressure brought to bear on the HPA by your organization. I’m sure it’s not your fault, but even the BbC needs to go through proper channels before we can infringe on the liberties of private citizens, no matter how critical you think the timing is. This whole episode has made me very uneasy, and I plan on filing an official protest.” She stepped past him and hurried down the stairs.

“I’ll get it to you as soon as I can, Doctor,” he replied stiffly. “And I assure you; you would not want this disease to get away from us.” He turned to Dawson. “Sorry to have inconvenienced you, Doctor. Have a safe flight home.” He started down the stairs after her, briefcase in one hand, flashlight in the other.

Dawson touched his shoulder, “And about your light, ‘Dr. Specter,’” he whispered. “Good idea, bad implementation. You clearly need more living subjects and years more research before you

have any hope of getting it right.” He winked at him. “Right now, I suspect it would be more of an annoyance than a problem for a hapless victim of this terrible disease.”

Jeff pulled the door shut behind them. “You’d better get seated, Doctor. We’re going to do this as quickly as possible, just in case they have any other tricks up their sleeves.”

There were a few anxious moments before they received clearance, but air traffic on the short runway was light this early in the morning. And they were the last scheduled flight for 20 minutes. Jeff swung the plane around at the end of the runway and paused while Jack quickly opened the door. Sava was inside in an instant. Jack helped drag the duffle bags clear of the door, then pulled it shut behind him. Jeff poured on the coal, and finally, as the wheels slid back smoothly into the fuselage, they were safely on their way home.

But Richard didn’t relax until the lights of the city had faded completely away behind them. “We’re all here, you know – all of us.” He put his arm around Elaine.

“I know, Rich. And I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so frightened before. It was a mistake, I know, but our family will always be our Achilles’ heel. It can’t be avoided. And I wouldn’t want it any other way.” She kissed him on the forehead. “I love you, you know.” She put her arms around him and kissed him. Eli and Oskar grinned at each other.

§

The sun was just coming up when the island finally swung into view. Eli was delighted when Papa, with a flourish, put his latest Eliglass helmet on a protesting Sava’s head. Although now made of shock-resistant black plastic instead of leather, it hadn’t really changed much over the years. “I know you don’t like it Sava, but it beats carrying you off the plane in a coffin.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Doctor. I’ve never slept in a coffin.” He gave him a wry smile and stood there stiffly while Dawson secured the helmet. He pretended he didn’t notice the children grinning at him.

“He looks like Luke Skywalker!” Eli giggled.

“More like Darth Vader,” Hannah countered. They all started laughing.

“Who is this ‘Darth Vader’?”

“You should watch more contemporary films, Sava. Perhaps something made after 1950? Some of them are actually quite entertaining.” Dawson wrapped the scarf around his neck and tucked it in.

Eli did a double-take as the compound came into view. “Jonathan! You’ve finished the pool! It’s absolutely beautiful! And so big!”

“It’s for everyone, Eli; that’s why it’s at the far side of the compound, up against the fence. Everyone who lives on the island has access to it. We thought it would help establish a sense of community and common goals...”

“I think they get it, Jonathan,” Elaine broke in gently.

“And it’s heated, Eli. It does get cold here sometimes, as you found out yourselves.” Jack winked at her. “And some of them haven’t made the big decision yet.”

“How many, Jack,” Oskar asked.

“Surprisingly, more than half, Oskar. But the injections haven’t started yet. We’ve insisted that there be a waiting period. It’s a life-changing decision, as you, more than anyone here, should know.”

Oskar remembered that day in the lab when he had taken matters into his own hands. He had often wondered what would have happened if he had waited. Of one thing he was certain: He wouldn’t have his telepathic abilities if he had waited and gotten the official injection. And their encounter with the Other One might have ended quite differently.

§

“Why don’t you kids go get some sleep? It’s been a long night, and you haven’t slept since the night before. You must all be exhausted. You can finish putting your things away when you wake up.”

“Can Hannah stay with us?”

“Of course, Eli! If it’s all right with Liva and Nils.” Elaine looked questioningly at Hannah.

“It’s okay with them, Mrs. Dawson. We’ve already asked.”

“Okay, but try to keep the noise to a minimum, kids. Your father and I will be trying to sleep just down the hall.”

“I don’t think so, Mama. I saw Papa leave on the golf cart with Sava, Jonathan, and Jack a few minutes ago. With the duffle bags.”

“Well, at least Henry had enough sense to get some sleep; and your parents and brother, Hannah. I guess I’ll be sleeping alone, at least for a while.”

“You can come sleep with us, Mama.” Eli grinned at her. “That would be great fun!”

“No thanks, Eli, as tempting as it is. ‘Sleep’ is the operative word here. But thanks for the offer.”

§

Hannah stepped out of the shower, dried herself off and put her pajamas on. “Next!” she called out, as she headed down the hall to Eli’s room. Eli and Oskar slipped past her and went into the bathroom together.

Hannah got into bed and slid up against the wall, hands behind her head, relaxed for the first time in weeks. She always felt safe here on the island. It was as though she was where she belonged at last, here with her family, her best friends in the whole world, and -- the frosting on the cake -- Jack, who now lived right next door to her. Jack! Her absolutely favorite – what? She honestly didn’t know what he was to her. All she knew was that it really mattered what he thought of her – sometimes more than anyone else. He was so very nice to her, and understood her, and worried about her – but perhaps for that very reason, she couldn’t resist exploiting that one perceived vulnerability of his. She loved to push his buttons and step back grinning while he tried to be stern and overprotective – and failed miserably at it because he was acutely aware that she was growing up and he had no real right to do it. She had his number and she knew it. And what great fun it all was!

The imp suddenly rose up in her and she closed her eyes, drifted down the stairs, across the compound, down the sparkling white terrazzo hallways of the Archaeogenetics’ Building, and finally, into his office where Eli’s Papa and Sava were in the midst of an animated conversation, and finally, into his mind...

Hannah! How many times...

She giggled and pulled the covers up over her head. *Just poking you, Jack! You didn’t really think you’d be able to tell I was there if I didn’t want you to know, did you?*

I know more often than you think, Hannah. For example, does ‘One down, three to go’ remind you of such an occasion? She could almost see the amused grin on his face when he saw her reaction.

She blushed. *But Jack! You couldn’t have...*

You’re right Hannah. I guess I must have made it all up. Now go to sleep. Please? You must be exhausted, he said, ever so gently.

Okay, Jack. A bit miffed, she crouched in the corner of his office, counted to ten, then stealthily reached for him again...

Sweet dreams, Hannah. It was almost as though he had suddenly grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

She retreated in an instant to Eli’s bed, confused and embarrassed, but oddly excited at the same time. She always enjoyed a new challenge...

Eli and Oskar stayed in the shower a long time, letting the hot water play over their bodies, and they washed each other, just as they had done those many years ago in Karlstad when he was really only 12 years old. He especially enjoyed washing her hair, mostly because of the way she scrunched up her eyes, wrapped her arms around him and smiled one of her tight little smiles as he vigorously scrubbed away at it. At those times, she was so cute he could barely stand it.

She nuzzled his neck “Even when you’re really clean, I can still smell you, Oskar.”

“Really? Am I that bad?” he reached for the soap.

“No, no! I love the way you smell. And you’ll never be able to wash it off. Besides, Jonathan told me...”

“I remember, Eli. He said a much larger portion of the vampire brain was devoted to sorting out smells, than in a human brain.” And he had noticed the difference himself. He was already attaching smells to his list of things he liked or disliked about people he knew. “I love the way you smell too, Eli.” He squeezed her just a little tighter and was rewarded with an even bigger grin.

She kissed him lightly, then turned off the water and grabbed her towel. “Let’s hurry Oskar, before Hannah goes to sleep on us. That just wouldn’t do.”

She dried herself off, reached for her pajamas, then impulsively grabbed his instead and slipped them on.

“Eli! What are you doing?” He stepped out of the tub and dried himself off.

“Can I Oskar?” She pressed his shirt to her face and breathed in deeply. “I think it’ll be kind of ...fun to wear your pajamas. Please, can I?”

“What am I going to wear?”

“You’ve got another pair in your dresser.” She paused a moment. “Or, you could wear mine.” She grinned at him.

He held her pajamas out in front of him, hesitated a minute, then gingerly put them on, being very careful not to hurt them. He knew they were made of cotton like his own, but suddenly they seemed fragile somehow, just like Eli had seemed that first night she climbed, naked, into his bed. He buried his face in her shirt and smiled at her. “They smell just like you, Eli.”

They felt... nice somehow, in spite of the fact that they were just a bit tight on him—and short. But he was profoundly aware they were something special and unique; because they were hers, and because he had held her in his arms so many times while she was wearing them. The word ‘erotic,’ a relatively new word for him, suddenly took on a whole new meaning.

“Let’s go Oskar,” she whispered. She took his hand and led him gently down the hall.

Hannah raised herself up on her elbow when she heard the door open. “What took you so long? It’s about time...” When she caught sight of Oskar, her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Then she started laughing hysterically. “You win, Eli! You win! I didn’t think you could do it, but you did!” she dissolved in laughter again.

Oskar turned red, “What do you mean, Hannah?” But he had a sinking feeling he knew. He had been snookered again!

Eli was horrified. “Oskar! Please! It isn’t what you think! Hannah, I wasn’t even thinking about that! This is...different. I really wanted to. And Oskar did too! The bet doesn’t count.”

“But why, Eli? Why would Oskar want to put on your pajamas?”

Eli looked at him pleadingly. “Because he...” she stammered.

“Because we’re...going steady.” He grinned at Hannah.

Eli breathed a sigh of relief.

Hannah cocked her head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It will, Hannah. Someday.”

“You sound like my mom, Eli. Oskar? What’s going on?”

“I’ll change if you want me to, Hannah,” he said quietly. And he let her into his mind. Just a bit.

“That’s...that’s okay, Oskar.” She smiled at him, slid back into the corner, and held the covers out for them. She couldn’t fully understand why, but she felt very happy for him – that he could see Eli that way.

“Hannah?” Eli ran her hands gently up and down her arms, then took her face in her hands. “I’m so sorry I left you behind. Were you scared?”

“I was a little, Eli. But Jack was there, and your Mama was there.”

“And you could have beaten anyone up that gave you a hard time anyway,” Oskar said.

“When you’re all alone in a strange place, that’s really not much of a comfort, Oskar.”

“Oh, Hannah...”

“It’s okay! Really! Jack and I...kind of...he told me...I mean, I heard him...” she grabbed Eli’s hands and held them tight. “I’m not like that, Eli. Why does Jack think I am?”

Eli's eyes got big. "He loves you, Hannah."

"But...He can't! He's..." Now she was even more confused.

"Not like...that, Hannah! More like this." Einstein popped into her head, and Oskar burst out laughing.

"Oskar! Are you besmirching my honor again?" She sat up and rolled up her sleeves.

He slid out of bed and backed away from her, still laughing. "I couldn't resist, Hannah." His voice suddenly became soft and gentle. "But seriously, Hannah; I think it's more like this:"

...She picked up speed in anticipation, and felt the wind blow her hair back, and the sun on her face; and Oskar's gentle, smiling face next to her. She was so happy, she felt a lump in her throat. She reached over, lightly touched his hand and smiled at him. He squeezed her hand gently, blushed, and looked away.

"I'm sorry, Oskar! I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't Hannah. I embarrassed myself." Oskar knew that there were many kinds of love, but sometimes it was hard for him to sort them all out and keep them separate. And sometimes when one blended into another, it caught him by surprise. "Sometimes, I really love you, Hannah. And other times, I really, really love you." He blushed again. "I...I mean..."

"I know what you mean, Oskar. And right now, I 'really, really' love you too." She reached over and brushed his cheek.

"Oh Oskar! I had forgotten that moment, because of what happened ...after."

"Jack loves you...like that," Oskar said, with deep and utter conviction. He had known Jack a long time. And even though Jack had grown up, He knew Jack had loved Eli – and still did. And he knew why. It was not surprising to him that he would love Hannah too. For many of the same reasons.

Hannah smiled at him. "Come back to bed, Oskar. I promise I won't hit you." She lay down on her back, and put her hands behind her head. Oskar slid into bed and did the same.

They were all quiet for a moment. Finally, Oskar's eyelids got heavy and he gave serious thought to going to sleep...

"Oskar?"

"What, Hannah?"

"Nice pajamas!" she giggled.

“Why, thank you, Hannah. My best friend picked them out for me.”

Chapter 40: New Revelations

Oskar and Eli dozed off quickly, but Hannah just couldn't go to sleep. She could feel the subtle tingling of the Ejuice coursing through her veins, even though most of it had long ago been used by her weak neural network to direct the repair of any remnants of damage she had overlooked herself, just as Jack had predicted it would. But ... what was it doing now? She knew she was as strong as she would ever be; consequently, it should be dormant now, waiting patiently for her to need it, but it wasn't. It was being used to do...something. She could sense the activity. *What could it be?* She was strangely unafraid.

§

"Time for dinner, sleepyheads." Elaine gently poked Eli, realized it was Oskar, then searched through the tangle of bodies until she spotted Eli's locket. "Eli, dinner is almost ready."

"Hi, Mama." She sat up and rubbed her eyes.

Oskar lay on his back, eyes open, as Elaine slowly came into focus. "Mom? I can explain..."

She smiled at him. "Oskar, as interesting as that tale might be, you don't have to explain anything to me."

"Hi, Mrs. Dawson!" Hannah scrambled out of bed and opened her suitcase.

Elaine rolled her eyes. "You brought a suitcase? You live next door, Hannah."

"It's just a little one. And I didn't want to drop anything on the way over." She grabbed a change of clothes and headed for the bathroom.

"We'll be down in a minute, Mama." Eli threw the covers off and stretched.

"No hurry, Eli. You've got 15 minutes or so." She closed the door behind her and headed down the stairs.

Oskar carefully took off her pajamas and handed them to her. "I hope I didn't stretch them out or anything, Eli.

"They look fine to me, Oskar." She held them out in front of her examining them closely. "And now they smell like you." She grinned at him.

He grinned back, dashed across the hall, grabbed a change of clothes, and came back into her room, still buttoning up his shirt. Eli handed him his pajamas and began rummaging through her drawers, when there was a light knock on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure Hannah." Oskar pulled his socks on and slipped into his shoes.

“I saw Jason on his way over with Dad, through the bathroom window. Maybe I’ll head on downstairs...” she gasped when she saw Eli standing naked in the middle of the room.

“I’m sorry Eli! Why didn’t you tell me...”

“Tell you what, Hannah? What’s wrong?”

“You’re...” she turned bright red.

“What? What am I?” she looked down at herself, then around the room, puzzled.

“You’re naked, Eli. I think Hannah was ... caught off guard.” Oskar loved it when Hannah was embarrassed; it helped make up for all the times she had zinged him. He simply couldn’t pass up this opportunity to get her good.

He pretended to be puzzled. “Hannah, you’ve seen her naked hundreds of times. I’VE seen her naked thousands of times. In fact, she’s even seen YOU naked hundreds of times. What’s the big deal?”

“I...I don’t know! It’s different when you’re here, Oskar.”

Oskar just couldn’t resist. “She looks the same to me whether you’re here or not, Hannah.” He walked around Eli pretending to examine her carefully. Eli, completely confused by now, stood there with her mouth open.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?!”

“I really don’t know Eli. You’ll have to ask Hannah.”

“Hannah?”

“Oskar hasn’t seen ME seeing you naked hundreds of times, Eli! That’s why!” Her face turned dark. “I’ll get you for this, Oskar. Just you wait.” She stormed out of the room.

Eli looked at him suspiciously. “What did you do, Oskar?”

“Who, me? I’m as confused as you are.” He tried desperately to close his mind to her, but it was too late. She was in...

She scratched her head. “I don’t get it Oskar. It’s sort of ...peculiar. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No it doesn’t does it? But that’s the way it is. I’ve known it pretty much since we started school with Jason and Hannah. Locker-room talk and all.”

“But why didn’t you ever tell me?”

He kissed her on the cheek. “Because I like you just as you are.”

“She’s going to get even with you, you know.”

“I know. But it was worth it.”

§

“Let’s go look at the village! There’s still plenty of daylight left.” Jason grabbed his jacket and headed outside.

Eli and Oskar looked at Papa questioningly.

“Go ahead kids. Your mom and I will finish up.” He paused. “But no flying into caves, okay? At least not this evening.”

“We promise, Papa.” Eli followed Oskar and Hannah out the door where, mysteriously, their bikes were all lined up waiting for them.

“Jason! What a good idea! I guess flying wouldn’t be practical, since it would be hard for you to keep up.” She couldn’t resist getting a dig in.

“Me too, Eli. Don’t forget.” Hannah put her arm around her big brother and hugged him.

Oskar opened the gate between the two houses and led the way out front, where he was surprised to find the old gravel road was now paved with beautiful, tight-fitting, white stones, complete with curbs and a sidewalk on the house-side of the street. A low grass-covered berm on the other side of the road formed a fair-weather barrier against the sea, but Oskar could just see the huge partially-submerged boulders that had been placed on the other side of the berm just in case the weather became more unfriendly. In any case, the waves were seldom a problem in the small harbor because the prevailing winds were generally from the west, and tiny Arrowhead Island to the east was a natural barrier against any errant storms with a mind of their own. To the north, the new dock shone in the sun in spite of the fact that it was after 5:00pm. The deck was white and new, and complemented the beautiful white ribbon of roadway perfectly. Graceful brushed-steel streetlights arched out over the sidewalk at regular intervals, and disappeared, along with the road, around the curve of the hill to the south, toward the village.

“Wow! Everything is so...white – and shiny,” Hannah exclaimed.

“Let’s go. I want to see the village before it gets dark.” Jason hopped on his bike and sped off. The others followed quickly behind.

Hannah effortlessly pulled up alongside Oskar. “Oskar? I just wanted you to know that I’m still going to get even with you, even though I know you’re right. Nothing personal; it’s just a matter of principle.” She winked at him.

He grinned at her. “And I would expect nothing else, Hannah. If there’s one thing I admire about you, it’s your principles.”

She gave him a suspicious look, couldn’t decide whether or not he had just insulted her again, opened her mouth as though she were about to say something, then shrugged it off, sped up, and caught up with Jason, who by then was more than halfway to the turn in the road.

Eli and Oskar took their time, marveling at all the work that had been done in their absence, even on this part of the island. The road was beautiful, and as smooth as silk. Once they picked up a bit of speed, the cracks between each stone became almost invisible, making the road appear as though it were a single piece of pure white granite. “Oskar, isn’t it beautiful? And what makes it even better is that it didn’t have to be this way. It could just be a regular road, and we wouldn’t have thought a thing about it.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think Jonathan had it in him.” They rounded the corner and almost ran into Jason and Hannah, who had stopped alongside the road, and were staring up the valley at the village grid.

The ribbon of roadway continued up the center of the valley in a gentle curve to the right, then suddenly near the end of the valley, bore to the left and, in a graceful arc, disappeared over the top of the ridge toward the lighthouse. The white road was the spine of the village, from which irregularly-spaced ribs, paved with standard black asphalt, curved gracefully away in both directions, following the natural contours of the valley and petering out at the base of the surrounding hills where a narrower road, up against the foothills, meandered around the entire valley, connecting them all together. There wasn’t a straight stretch of road anywhere. No two existing lots were the same size, and no two houses looked exactly the same, in spite of the fact that they were all prefabricated. Jonathan had explained that, once the base model modules had been designed to fit together efficiently in more than 8 basic ways per module, the variations possible became almost astronomical, especially if you included color, variations in outside wall covering, and roof styles. Barely a fourth of the lots had homes that were under construction and as near as they could tell from here, only 20 or so appeared to be occupied.

“Those are the homes of the old-timers,” Jason explained. “They got first dibs, since they had been working for Archaeogenetics the longest.”

Oskar laughed and pointed to the street sign on the corner. “‘White Road!’ Who would’ve thought?”

“Jack told me they were going to name it ‘Dawson Road,’ but your mama and papa talked them out of it,” Hannah said.

“Maybe this was Jonathan’s way of getting even,” Oskar laughed.

They had only ridden about halfway up the valley when Eli noticed that they had attracted the attention of three children who were following on bicycles, a close, but respectable distance

behind them. Without saying a word, she spun around, raced down the hill and skidded to a stop in front of them before they could react.

“Could one of you tell me where that road goes?” She pointed to the ridge.

“You know very well where it goes. You can’t fool me. You’re Eli aren’t you?” A blond-haired boy, no more than 11 years old, slim, with a pageboy haircut leaned forward on his handlebars. For an instant, Eli was snatched back to that first moment she had seen Oskar, stabbing fiercely at the tree.

She feigned surprise. “How did you ever guess? You must be the smart one in the group.”

The two younger girls behind him giggled. “That’s our brother. And we don’t think he’s very smart at all,” the older one said.

“How did you recognize me?”

“Duh! Your picture’s on the side of the building! But you were cuter then. You’re old now.” He grinned at her.

Jason, Hannah and Oskar pulled up beside her. The boy took one look at Hannah and his mouth opened, then shut with an audible snap.

“Did you hear that, Hannah? I’m old now! I guess that means you’re old too, huh?”

Hannah smiled at the now flustered boy. “What’s your name?”

“He’s Allan. This is my sister Sara and I’m Anne, with an ‘e,’” the older girl said excitedly.

Hannah laughed. “Glad to meet you, Allan, Sara and Anne, with an ‘e.’ I’m Hannah with an ‘h,’ and this is my brother, Jason, and Eli’s best friend, Oskar.

“And, just for your information, that’s Hannah’s picture on the building, not mine. I didn’t even know her then.”

“But...my dad says you’re the reason he has such a cushy job and we have such a nice house. And I just thought...”

Well, you almost got it right, Allan. We’re both part of the reason your dad has his job. But the real reason is even more exciting; and it’s a secret. But your dad knows.”

“We heard you were coming, and when we saw you on your bikes, we kind of... are you going to stay now for a while? In the Mansions? Will you be going to school with us? Mom says...”

“They’re not mansions, Allan; they’re just houses.” Oskar was a bit taken aback. The fact that anyone thought he was living in a mansion made him uncomfortable.

“That’s what everyone calls it,” Sara insisted. “‘The Mansions.’ ‘cause when you see it from the top of the hill it looks like one, with the three great houses, the beautiful white fence and now the swimming pool.”

“Well, you’re all welcome to come visit any time. And the swimming pool is yours anyway. Didn’t your dad tell you?” Jason smiled at her.

“He did, but we weren’t sure...”

“It’s true; we promise. You can come anytime. Tomorrow even, if you want.” Eli smiled at her.

Jason looked at his watch. “We’d better get going if we want to see the whole village before it gets dark.”

Hannah waved to them as they headed up the road. “We’ll see you in school,” she shouted.

“Bye!” they shouted back.

§

All four of them sat quietly on the bench at the edge of Vista Point. The dark cliff of the western ridge rose up another 15 meters behind them, casting its shadow down the hill, just touching White Road as it turned abruptly and disappeared over the south ridge. The whole valley lay below them, and the setting sun reflecting off the high clouds to the west lit up the tops of the surrounding hills a dark, rusty red. The streetlights had just come on, outlining the entire valley and turning White Road into a shiny amber ribbon of light.

“This is our home now, Eli.” Oskar took her hand in his. “Everything is good now.”

The last time you said that, bad things happened, Eli thought to herself. But she was more relaxed than she had been in months, she realized. Maybe he was right this time.

“Let’s go look at the park at the top of the ridge! We’ll be able to see the lighthouse from there.” Jason headed for his bike.

“We can’t Jason. There’s too much fog. We won’t be able to see a thing.”

He looked at Hannah, puzzled. “What fog? There’s no fog.” He hopped on his bike. “Let’s go.” He started down the hill, then swung right, up White Road toward the ridge.

“Are you tired, Hannah? Did you want to go home?” Eli whispered.

“No, Eli. But I thought...” her voice trailed off. There had been fog. She had seen it clearly. But where was it now? She shook her head and pedaled hard to catch up with Jason. Eli and Oskar were right beside her.

They could just see the statue of the Phoenix ahead of them at the top of the ridge, when suddenly the somber tones of the lighthouse foghorn echoed across the valley. Almost simultaneously, a bright red glow illuminated the ridge, and a wall of pink-tinged fog poured over the top and slowly made its way down the hill toward them. Jason, 10 meters in front of them, suddenly disappeared into a rolling black wall.

They stopped dead in their tracks and watched, fascinated, as the silent wall approached them at a fast walk then, just as quickly, immersed them in darkness, prickling their skin as it whispered past. They could feel the gentle breeze, cool and damp, as it ever so lightly blew their hair back, whirled it around gently, and plastered it against their faces.

“Jason! Are you okay?” Hannah called out.

“I’m fine, Hannah! This is absolutely amazing! I can barely see my hands in front of my face!”

“Walk your bike back down the hill toward us, Jason. Don’t do anything stupid!”

“I assure you, I’m not THAT stupid, Hannah.” He peered into the darkness, then slowly and tentatively moved over to the side of the road and followed the curb down the hill toward the sound of their voices. The hair on the back of his neck stood up when the next wail of the foghorn echoed in the darkness. *Spooky!* He shuddered, then quickened his pace just a bit.

Eli felt a damp hand touch her cheek. “Are...you okay, Eli? Why are you afraid?” Oskar sounded concerned.

“I don’t know, Oskar.” She grabbed his hand and held it tight. She was a bit uneasy, but she didn’t know why. It was just fog after all...

“There you are!” Hannah grabbed Jason’s arm and squeezed. “I thought I’d lost you to ‘The Fogggg’.”

Jason grinned demonically. “I’ll kill you aaaaallll!”

“Save the women and children!” Oskar shouted. He reached back for Eli, but she was gone.

“Eli? Where are you?”

“She’s ...riding her bike, Oskar! Down the hill, really fast!” Hannah gasped, “Eli, stop! You’re going to...” she covered her eyes with her hands. Oskar gripped his handlebars white-knuckled tight.

They could hear the chatter of her tires skidding on the road below them, then silence.

They sped up as best they could, frantically following the curb through the thick fog, until suddenly it lifted and the lights of the village burst into view. Oskar glanced up and realized they

had actually dropped just below the fog level. They could see the entire valley, the harbor, and Arrowhead island, the top of which was still bathed in the red glow of the setting sun. The fog bank, moving slowly eastward, only extended about a fourth of the way over the valley at this point. And there, at its ragged edge, just where it touched the curve on White Road ahead of them, was Eli, still straddling her bike, no more than a meter from the edge of the rocky ravine that had forced the road into its tight curve down the hill.

Hannah rode down the hill toward her at full speed. Oskar followed closely behind, but for once, found it difficult to keep up with her.

She threw her bike to the ground, rushed up to Eli and grabbed her in her arms. “Oh, Eli! I saw you fly through the air and smash into the rocks! I thought you were dead!”

Eli looked at her oddly. “I’m fine, Hannah. You warned me just in time. How on earth did you see? Even with my eyes, I couldn’t...”

“I don’t know, Eli! I don’t know!” she hugged her even tighter.

Oskar walked slowly up behind Hannah, turned her around gently, and kissed her on the cheek. “You saved her life, Hannah.” *I saw it, Hannah, as plain as day. I saw it through your eyes. I saw her head split open on the rocks; I saw her lying there with her eyes open. Dead! I know she was dead! But she isn’t.* He kissed her again. And again.

“Oskar, I...”

“Shut up, Hannah.” He put his hand over her mouth, and wagged his finger at her. “If you can’t say something nice about yourself, then just shut up!”

Everything was suddenly dark again as a finger of fog reached out and wrapped itself around them, then released them again almost as quickly. Eli gasped, then collapsed into Oskar’s arms as he snatched her off her bike. *Eli, why did you run away like that? Didn’t you know...*

I wasn’t thinking Oskar. I was so afraid, and I don’t know why. I just ...ran.

Jason pulled up beside her. “I...I didn’t scare you, did I? If I did, I’m really sorry.”

“No, Jason,” she reassured him. “I think I scared myself. But I’m okay now.” She got back on her bike, wobbled a bit, then started slowly down the hill. Oskar and Hannah flanked her, and Jason hung back behind them protectively, glancing back warily at the fog as it continued to pour over the hill and down the valley above their heads. He had never seen Eli so frightened before and it made him very uneasy. *What could possibly be there that would terrify Eli so much that she would lose it that way? Eli, who remained level-headed when she rescued me from the vault in spite of her fear; who taunted Den Tredje until he chased her up the stairs, while her Mama lay bleeding to death on the floor at his feet...* Again, he glanced uneasily behind him. He didn’t relax until the houses swung into view around the side of the hill.

Chapter 41: Future and Past

“Come on, Jason! What are you doing back there?” Eli sounded like her old self again. He breathed a sigh of relief and hurried to catch up.

“I was just worried...”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Jason. It’s just fog. And I guess I was just acting like a girl. It happens every now and then no matter how hard I try...”

“What’s wrong with being a girl?!”

“For you, nothing, Hannah. For me...it’s still hard to get used to sometimes. Sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Yeah, Eli. Remember who vanquished *Den Sjätte* singlehandedly,” Oskar pointed out. “And Hannah is definitely all girl.”

“Why, thank you, Oskar...I think.” She hopped off her bike, opened the gate with a flourish, and ushered them in.

Oskar hurried inside before the others and headed straight for the living room, where Mom and Dad were quietly reading. “Dad, Hannah has Gudmund’s ability to see the future.”

Elaine snapped her book shut. “What?! How can you be sure Oskar?”

Oskar recounted the entire trip, finishing up with the frightening vision Hannah had shared with him. By this time, Eli, Hannah and Jason had joined them. Jason reminded him that she had also predicted the fog.

“Oh yeah! I forgot about that. Watching Eli die kind of put it out of my mind.”

“Oskar! I didn’t die!”

“Yeah you did, Eli; in an alternate universe. And in that alternate universe lives a very unhappy Oskar.”

Eli started to grin, but suddenly realized that he was serious. “Oskar, I had Ejuice less than a day ago! I wouldn’t have died.”

“You died, Eli. I don’t know why, but you did. And I was in that alternate universe for way too long before the fog lifted and I...”

She saw the tears in his eyes. She sat down beside him and put her arms around him.

“I’m sorry, Eli. I’m being stupid, I know. But it was so real.”

“You four have been through a lot over the last week. You’re understandably tense, angry, and upset. Why don’t you go for a late swim, or just relax on the porch with a good book?”

“No, Papa. I think Oskar and I are going up to bed. Sorry, Hannah! Is that okay?”

“Sure, Eli. I’m not tired at all. I think I’ll stay and talk to your Mama and Papa for a while.” She loved talking to Eli’s Papa, and they had a lot to talk about tonight. It was all kind of exciting, this new gift from Sava. And perhaps Jack could join them...

“Well, I’m going swimming,” Jason headed for the door.

“Not alone, Jason,” Dawson called after him.

“I’ll get Dad to come along, Mr. Dawson. He won’t mind, I’m sure. I wouldn’t be able to get to sleep anyway.”

Eli and Oskar went quietly up the stairs together.

“Let’s sleep in my room again tonight, Oskar. Okay?”

“Okay, Eli.” His eyes met hers for a moment, then he looked down at his feet.

“What’s wrong, Oskar?”

“I’m really tired, Eli.”

“But – we just got up a few hours ago.”

“No. I mean I’m really tired. I’m tired of...all this.”

“What do you mean, Oskar?”

“All these things keep happening. Over and over again.” His voice got hard. “And because of it, I know we’re not going to live forever, Eli. The odds are so against it. Sooner or later, it’ll happen. One of us is going to die – probably sooner rather than later. And the other will be alone forever. Or Mama. Or Papa. Or just...anyone we love. There are too many ways it could happen, and I’m just...tired of having to think about it all the time, every day, every hour. The real world seems to be a terrible place for us.”

Mama? Papa? Oskar never calls them that. She took his hand in hers and guided him gently into his room. She stood in front of him and began undressing him. He stood there passively, and let her do it—but she couldn’t read him at all.

When she finished, she undressed herself slowly and deliberately, then put her arms around him. He relaxed in her arms, put his head on her shoulder and, like a little boy, wrapped his legs

around her and let her carry him to the bed. She slid in beside him, and pulled the covers up over their heads.

“Do you remember that last night in Karlstad, Oskar? When we were thinking about our move to England and how our lives were going to be wonderful with Papa taking care of us?”

He sighed, closed his eyes and put his arms around her.

“And do you remember how you let me see myself through your eyes, and you saw yourself through mine?”

“Things were different then, Eli. We were little. And I was young...and stupid.”

She bristled a bit. “And what are we now, Oskar?”

“I don’t know. Old and jaded?”

She shook her head dismissively, threw the covers back, and rubbed his back gently. “Yes, Oskar. We’re older. But isn’t that what we wanted?”

“I thought so, Eli; but now, I just don’t know. I don’t see anything good about it right now. I think I’d rather be young and stupid. I was happier then.”

“I was happy then, too. But I’m happy now. Because I’m still with you.”

“But I could be gone in an instant! And then where would you be?”

“I’d be with you still, Oskar. You know that,” she said quietly.

“That’s what I mean! I can’t bear the thought of you dying for me anymore. I’m not a little kid, and I don’t like it.”

“Then I guess you’d better not die, Oskar.” She grinned at him.

He threw up his hands, exasperated. “See?! That’s what I mean! Growing up isn’t at all what I thought it would be.”

“Then just don’t think about it. There are some things you just can’t do anything about. Think about the things that make you happy. And how to keep them near you. That’s what I do.” She squeezed his hands tightly.

“That doesn’t help when the chips are down, Eli”

“But there are a few real advantages to being older, along with all the disadvantages.” She kissed him softly. “For example...” she bit him gently on the neck, then smiled at him with that pixie smile he loved so much.

He squeezed her just a bit tighter and felt his tension slide quietly away.

She kissed him again and ran her fingers gently through his hair.

“Allan said you were old, Eli. And not as cute as you were.” He smiled gently. “I think I agree with him.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“You’re really pretty now – and more.”

“More what!?”

He blushed. “You know...”

“No, I don’t know!” She was getting a bit impatient with him. “Tell me!”

He took both her hands in his, kissed them, then gently pressed them back over her head on either side of her pillow. Oddly, she didn’t resist him as she usually did when they were sparring; instead, she stared up at him intensely with her impossibly blue eyes.

“No, I’ll show you...”

And he did.

§

How do you feel, Hannah? Have you noticed any other differences?”

“No, Mrs. Dawson. Everything’s the same.”

“Do you mind if we ... try a few things, Hannah? Just to be sure?”

“I want you to! What do you want me to do?”

“Just sit there for a moment, Hannah.” He picked up the phone. “Elaine? Would you get her a cup of tea while I...”

“He’s at home, Dr. Dawson. And he’ll be happy to come over.” Hannah grinned from ear to ear.

Dawson looked at her oddly, then hung up and redialed Jack’s home phone number. “Jack? I think you’d better get over here. It seems Hannah has somehow acquired Gudmund’s precognitive ability...No...I’m not positive. That’s why I’d like you to come over. And do something...different on the way, if you would.” He sat back down at the table. “You’ve quite

possibly passed one test already, Hannah, even if we leave out the fog and Eli's fatal non-accident."

Elaine put Hannah's cup of tea on the table in front of her. "Jack's on his way, then?"

"Yes. I think between the three of us we should be able to figure this all out, and separate the wheat from the chaff. Hannah, I want you to tell me what Jack is going to do that's different."

"He's coming around to the front door, but he's going to peek in the dining room window on the way by. Not the first window, but the second one."

Jack slipped through the gate, crouched low next to the bushes, passed the first window, and popped his head up at the second. All three of them were staring directly at him. He felt the hair rise on the back of his neck, recovered quickly, and stepped in the front door with a smile on his face. "You got me! A cat burglar wouldn't have a chance with you on duty, Hannah."

He sat down across from her. "But this is hardly solid evidence, Hannah. You could have read my mind and seen which way I was coming."

"But...I didn't! I would never..." Hannah couldn't believe that Jack could be accusing her of lying about this.

"Not on purpose, Hannah. I know you would never do it on purpose. But suppose it was happening unconsciously? Wouldn't you want to know? As a scientist, you simply have to isolate all the variables until you fully understand the part each of them plays in the process!"

"He's right, Hannah. You could also have known Jack was at home because of your telepathic abilities. And of course, you knew he would come over if I asked, "Dr. Dawson said.

"But I didn't. I saw him." She said softly.

"I believe you Hannah. But we still have to prove it." Jack gently took her hand. "I believe you."

And she knew he did.

For the next hour, they flipped coins, drew cards, and threw dice. For the grand finale, Elaine emptied her coin purse on the table. They all applauded when Jack turned over her tiny piece of folded paper, on which she had simply written: '8 heads, and 10 tails.'

"Exactly right! Is that good enough for you, Doctor?"

"Yes, but it's only the beginning. She obviously isn't doing this all the time, or it would be impossible for her to carry on an intelligible discussion with anyone. It's either intermittent, or she can voluntarily turn it on or off."

"Or it only happens when she concentrates, like their telepathic abilities," Elaine volunteered.

“Well, why don’t we ask our little lab rat what she thinks? She can talk you know.” Jack sounded mildly annoyed.

“I’m sorry, Hannah! Jack’s right of course. Do you have any thoughts as to how it works and how much control you have?”

“Mrs. Dawson is kind of right, Mr. Dawson. I had to concentrate here while we were doing the tests. But in the village, those things were just...there. And they really confused me.”

“How far ahead can you see, Hannah? Do you have a feel for that?”

“I’m not sure, Jack. It might have been ten minutes between the time I saw the fog, and when the others saw it. With Eli, it was just a few seconds. I don’t know why.”

“How about now, Hannah? Can you predict the course of our conversation?”

“No. It’s way too complicated. I sort of hear whispers and disconnected sentences, but every time I answer a question or say anything at all, it all changes.”

“Gudmund’s loops again, Rich. Every time Hannah reveals something related to her new gift, it changes the future just enough to make it unpredictable and unsettled. It’s no wonder then that Gudmund and his father had such trouble with it, even after years of experience. No long-range ‘stable future’ predictions, Hannah?” Elaine asked.

“Yes. Actually I CAN see one thing quite clearly,” she said somberly, pausing for effect. “I can see that we all live happily ever after.” She grinned at them.

“Well! That’s a relief, Hannah.” Jack put his arm around her shoulder. “Now let me walk you home. I think we’ve done all we can tonight.”

“I knew you were going to say that, Jack. Now you have to figure out whether I read you, or predicted it. And I’m not going to tell.” Her eyes twinkled. She was back ahead of him again. This had, all in all, been a perfect day.

§

Oskar and Eli lay on their backs, side by side, holding hands and looking out the window at the stars; tired, but not tired enough yet to go to sleep. Eli squeezed his hand, sighed happily, and closed her eyes.

“Now aren’t you happy you’re a girl?” Oskar said smugly.

Her jaw dropped. *Who does he think he is? Adonis?* She resisted the urge to smack him good, then grinned at him impishly, “I guess it’s okay, Oskar, but this could have worked out just as well for me if you were the girl. And I had remained a boy.”

She saw the look on his face, and continued turning the screw. “Remember, we were together for a long time before, and we were both boys.”

“Yeah, but...”

“In fact, I was a boy long before you were. And for a much longer time, too. I was just missing a few bits and pieces. Besides, you’re prettier than I am anyway. You would have been a much prettier girl than me.”

“I’m not pretty!”

“Yes you are!” she pinched his cheek. “And you’re cute too!” she pinned his arms to the bed. “You would have made the cutest girlfriend a boy like me could ever want. And aren’t blonds supposed to have more fun? Elias and ...Oskar? No, we’d have to come up with a better name for you. Oksana? Hmmm. I think I like it! Elias and Oksana. And when we grow up and get married, I’ll take care of you like a good husband should. You’ll stay home and mind the children, while I fly out every day to earn us a good living.”

“But I’m a boy. I could never be a girl!”

“Why not, Oksana? That’s pretty selfish of you, don’t you think? Here I make all the sacrifices and you reap all the benefits. As if I ever wanted to be a dumb old girl in the first place. I only did it for you,” she pouted.

“Eli, stop it.”

“I’m serious. I told you I was a boy, but you insisted on thinking of me as a girl. Sooo...I decided I would make the ultimate sacrifice for you and become a ...girl.” She shuddered. “It’s the least you can do for me in return, after all these years. I think I’ll go have a talk with Jonathan. No sense putting it off any longer.” She climbed out of bed, headed for the door and jerked it open, slamming it against the wall.

“Okay, Eli. I’m sorry!”

“For what, Oksana?” she turned, put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“For whatever I said that made you mad.”

She rolled her eyes. “You don’t know?! How could you be so stupid?”

He grinned at her. “Besides, you’re bluffing. You don’t have any clothes on.”

“Well, I can remedy that right now!” She threw open her drawers and began throwing clothes on the floor.

“Eli, stop! I take it back...almost.”

“What, Oksana? What do you take back...almost?”

“I should have said, ‘Now aren’t you happy I’m a boy?’” He ducked as she threw a pillow at him.

He threw it back at her, and it began.

Eli had taken a liking to pillows; pillows of all sizes, shapes and colors. They were all over her window seat, in a trunk at the foot of her bed, and stacked in a neat pyramid on the floor in the corner. By the time they were both out of breath, they had all been wielded at least once.

“Truce?” he panted, feebly tossing a huge, limp blue pillow at her. It plopped softly and harmlessly on the floor at her feet.

“No! You have to say ‘Oksana’ first.” She nailed him on the side of the head with a small, pink, heart-shaped pillow, a gift from Hannah.

“Oksana! Oksana!” He fell back on the bed, arms outstretched, laughing. She hopped in beside him, put her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Well, all I know is, I’m really glad you’re a girl, Eli.”

She grinned. “And I’m glad you’re a boy. Even if you are a pretty one.”

He pulled the covers up over them, took her in his arms, and let her see herself through his eyes.

§

Elias sat quietly in the tree, watching the children play in the park. It was one of those rare times when he remembered; when he remembered those times so long ago when he had been a boy. It happened less and less often as time went by, so when it did, he savored every minute. He had fed earlier, so his immediate needs had been fulfilled.

Now was the time he usually thought about all he had lost. And as painful as that could be, there were those rare times when the scale was balanced and other, even rarer times when he could actually be happy for a few moments. The children’s laughter, randomly disbursed among the sea of blond hair and gaiety, was the catalyst today. He closed his eyes, remembering the day he showed sweet Jena his cave; the cave he had inherited from his brother, who gave it over to him bit-by-bit as he got older and more grown up, until it was finally his and his alone. And he remembered how he had felt when she smiled at him, then stood on her tip-toes and kissed him with a sweet little-girl kiss. And how at that exact moment she became his very best friend, just partly because they shared a secret that no one else in the world knew.

He opened his eyes with a start. Several of the children had begun screaming with delight as the thick fog rolled slowly across the field toward them. They began running in and out of it, turning it into a huge game of hide-and-seek, running into one another in the fog and picking themselves up off the ground, laughing.

Elias resisted the powerful urge to join them, afraid that, if he did, he would destroy the magic that comes from viewing such things from afar in their completeness – hence in their illusory perfection. Too near, and the illusion could be shattered and his real life would come flooding back with a vengeance.

And so he remained safe in his tree and watched the fog move closer; sad, because he knew that, once it reached him, the game would be over and the children would all go their separate ways, back to their warm, loving families. Or at least that was what he desperately wanted to believe.

“Come with me, Elias.” The voice of his tormentor slithered menacingly out of the fogbank and wrapped itself around him like a snake.

He froze. And wet himself, even though he had been dry and barren since the day he was turned. His terror left him breathless and paralyzed, unable for a moment to think at all.

“I’ve been looking for you for the longest time,” the fog whispered to him. “You’re my one loose thread, beautiful one. I’ve come to take you home. Your family misses you -- and I’ve missed you.”

He threw out his arms, leaped too soon, and fell out of the tree like a rock, hitting the ground hard, wings barely formed. He leaped into the air twice more before they were fully firmed up and leaped one last time just as the fog enveloped him. He felt a clawed hand on his ankle, twisted lose, and with a powerful thrust of his wings, threw himself to the side then straight up, over the trees, but he could hear the sound of heavier wings close behind him, gaining rapidly.

A single talon raked his back. He dove blindly into the darkness and counted to himself, One...two...three, then pulled up sharply, hoping to evade it, but it was no use. His feet brushed against the velvety blackness of its wings, and he instantly felt his left wing lose its lift -- then his right, as twin talons tore huge chunks of them away. He tumbled through the trees and landed flat on his back on the freshly-mown grass. What was left of his wings withered and floated away in the damp breeze.

He rolled over just in time to evade the powerful talons that brushed past his face and buried themselves deep in the ground, throwing out clods of soft dirt and clumps of grass. He leapt to his feet and ran, dodging back and forth, ducking and weaving, trying anything to evade his nightmare.

Something snagged his foot and he fell face down in the grass, but before he could move a muscle, he felt the creature’s weight pinning him to the ground and smelled the stink of its foul breath. He flailed about helplessly, but despite his efforts, felt himself being rolled over until he

was face to face with his living nightmare. And once again, those soulless deep blue eyes stared into his own.

And it kissed him. Its vile mucus-covered lips pressed against his, and he tasted the foulness of decayed flesh and felt its animal lust invade and permeate his consciousness. He struggled helplessly as his clothes were torn away and he was brutally dragged by his hair across the field and into the surrounding brush. He twisted and turned, ripping bushes out by their roots in a desperate attempt to delay the inevitable, all to no avail. Finally, in the darkness of the culvert, the creature kneeled over him, pinned his arms to the ground, pressed his face into the mud and...

Elias went limp and went to his other place – a place he had found before, damp, dark and silent, where he could be alone while the storm raged so near, tearing away at what was left of his dignity.

But there in the darkness a tiny white light appeared, grew brighter, and expanded until...

“Elias! Wake up! Eli! I’m here!” He felt himself being lifted up and away from the darkness and the foul smells and the primal lust and felt Oskar’s strong arms around her, holding her tightly. “You’re here, Eli. You’re not there. You’re here, with me. With Mama and Papa. Safe!”

She trembled in his arms, felt the warmth of the morning sun, heard the sounds of the sea and the cries of the gulls, and smelled the clean sheets and the faint remnants of Hannah’s lavender shampoo still clinging to them from yesterday.

Chapter 42: Second Thoughts

“Why didn’t you tell me, Eli?” They sat together on her window seat, Eli in Oskar’s lap, holding tightly to his arms, making sure they were still holding her close.

“Because I didn’t remember – until yesterday.”

“Was it real? Or just a nightmare?”

“Real. It was real – I...I think.” She shuddered.

“But...how did you get away from him? It would have been impossible.”

“Yes.”

“Then how...”

“I could show you, Oskar, but...”

“No!” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Then I should tell you. You should know, so you’ll understand.”

“I don’t need to understand, Eli.”

She put her hand gently over his mouth.

“He...after he was ...finished with me, He let go of me. Just for a second, but it was enough. I rolled into the culvert where it sloped down, widened, and went under the road. It was covered with a really heavy iron grating. I had actually slept there before, so I knew it was there.

“Anyway, I squeezed through the grating into the big iron pipe that went under the road. And he almost had me, but he didn’t...he couldn’t get through,” she whispered. “He was too big. And the bars were too strong, even for him, so he stood there looking at me with those eyes. He stood there all night, ugly, stinking and disgusting, and just ... looked at me. With those eyes. And he was there all night, until finally when the sky got pink, he left. And then, I left, another way. And went very far away, and never came back. I never saw him again.” She stood at the window, and looked out at the sea. Oskar turned her around and gently pressed his forehead against hers.

“I can fix this, Eli. Like I fixed Hannah that night.”

She pushed him away gently. “No, Oskar. You can’t. Or rather, I won’t let you. It’s a part of what I am, and what I’ve become. It’s too late.”

“But...you agreed with me when I did it to Hannah.”

“Because it wasn’t yet a part of who Hannah was. And it should never have been. That’s why.”

“I’m not sure I understand, but...isn’t that part of the kind of stuff we shouldn’t understand until we’re grown up?”

“I understand it, Oskar. Whether I should or not.”

“I’m going to tell Hannah and Jason, Eli. And Mom and Dad. And Jack and Henry. They need to know, and I don’t want you telling them.”

“Don’t be silly, Oskar. I’ll tell them. Just give me...”

“No! I told you I’m telling them. And I don’t want you anywhere around when I do.”

“Oskar, I...”

“Let me do this for you, Eli. Please?”

She sighed, “Okay, Oskar.” She was secretly relieved. This one had caught her off guard. And it made her wonder how many others there were, lurking in the darkness of her past. “But right now, I just need to ... rest for a little while” She lay down on the bed, hands clasped behind her head and closed her eyes.

Oskar hesitated a moment, then began picking up the pillows still strewn about the room. He carefully arranged them around her until she was almost invisible beneath them. Finally, he lifted her head and placed the pink heart-shaped pillow beneath it.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you, Oskar.”

He kissed her on the forehead, gently closed the door behind him and headed downstairs.

§

After Oskar finished, everyone was quiet. Finally, Jack shook his head. “I can’t believe all that was roiling around in her sweet little head back when I was 13 and thought she was absolutely the most incredible girl I had ever met. How could she be so...normal, knowing that one of these nightmares could inadvertently pop up in her dreams any time at all?”

“I’m not sure, Jack. Some people become dark and withdrawn after trauma of that magnitude. They become sociopaths, or worse. And others, like Eli, become extremely empathetic and caring, albeit with scars they’ll never rid themselves of completely. And unlike a normal human, she’s had over 200 years to accumulate them.” Dawson sighed. *Will it never end for her?*

“Well, let’s hope that after more years go by, her supply of good memories will outweigh the bad ones.” Elaine thought about her own 40 years of hell and how difficult it all still was for her, almost on a daily basis. She couldn’t imagine how it must be for Eli.

“Doctor? It’s just a thought, but wouldn’t we be able to mitigate the effect of these things if we talked to Sava? Didn’t he and Gudmund watch over her carefully all those years?”

“From around the middle of the 19th century, yes. But before that, Eli was on her own, Henry. But it’s an excellent idea. We can at least have him fill us in on anything that happened when they were on duty.”

“Thank you, Oskar. Why don’t you go get Eli up for breakfast if she’s feeling up to it. I think your dad and Sava have a great deal to discuss today.” Elaine put her arm around him and squeezed him reassuringly.

§

“They know, Eli.” Oskar moved some of the pillows aside and lay down next to her.

“I know, Oskar. Hannah told me.” She kissed him. “Thank you.”

The sound of a ship’s horn got them up instantly, and they rushed to the window. The small ship tied up to the dock disgorged scores of men and women, who all queued up and, after their badges were scanned, climbed aboard the waiting electric busses, which then moved slowly down White Road toward the village.

“Wow! I was wondering who was building all the houses. These must be the ones. But why didn’t we see the ship yesterday evening?”

“Dad told me the ship never stays, Eli, and it only comes once every three days. None of them are allowed on the island at night, and the ship doesn’t leave in the evening until everyone who got off in the morning is accounted for.” He grinned at her. “So I guess that means no flying during work hours.”

“But...for how long?! I don’t like this!”

“Not long, Eli. As soon as the major construction is done, the Archaeogenetics employees will finish up. Since they’re their own homes, Jonathan figured they’d have the incentive, and it helps promote...”

“Yeah, I know. ‘a sense of community.’” She rolled her eyes. “Let’s go out on the front porch and watch.” She headed down the stairs.

Hannah and Jason joined them on the front porch, and they all watched the busses move slowly down the road, past Eli’s and Oskar’s home-to-be, and finally, their own. “I guess it’s okay for us to be seen. Jack would have told me if it weren’t.”

“They’re still all employees of Genterapi, Hannah. No one is allowed to come unless they’ve worked there for at least five years.” Jason said.

“And how do you know all this, Jason?” Hannah was irritated. Normally, Jack kept her well informed on such things, and she didn’t like it that Jason had one-upped her.

“Dad. Last night when we were swimming. A guy from the village was swimming too. Turns out he’s Allan’s, Anne’s and Sara’s dad. Dad already knew him.”

“It’s a small village, huh?” Eli grinned at him.

“They’re all looking at us, Eli.” Oskar whispered. The three busses passed by silently, windows filled with faces, all staring at them.

They stood up and waved, and were rewarded by reciprocal waves and smiles from the busses.

One man watched them quietly from the back of the third bus, his face in the shadows, his wide-brimmed hat pulled down low over his forehead. *They’re all here! Which probably means their families are all here too, as we thought.* He leaned back in his seat thinking about their future, which lay out before him as clearly as a road map.

“Well, Hannah? What do you see in our future for today?” Oskar asked.

“I see myself getting even with you, Oskar. But of course, if I tell you how, it’ll change, won’t it? So I think I’ll keep it to myself,” she said, smugly.

“Well, if you’re so good at this, why didn’t you foresee that big spider that just settled in on your shoulder?” He backed away from her.

She leaped out of her chair, shook herself and frantically brushed at her shoulders. “Where?!”

“Ah! I see your ability has its limits. I’ll make note of it.” He smiled at her.

“Oskar, I owe you double now!” she rubbed her hands together. “And I see your future has changed accordingly.” She chuckled menacingly. “It couldn’t be better if I had thought of it myself. But then...I guess I did, huh?”

“Unless it’s another ontological paradox, Hannah.”

“I’ll bet you don’t think I know what that means, Oskar. Your dad told me all about it when he was warning me what I shouldn’t discuss with Sava.”

“Well, are we going, or what!” Jason stood up, impatiently.

“Where?” Eli was confused.

“In your absence, we decided we’d try to bike around the island on the beach. And if we run into obstacles, we can try hiking the rest of the way, at least to the lighthouse and back. What do you think?”

“Let’s do it!”

My mom’s already packed us a lunch, Eli, I hope you don’t mind that we’re doing this. If you do, I’ll stay...

“No, No. Let’s go, Hannah. I think it’s a great idea. As long as we get back before the fog comes in this evening.” She smiled at her.

It was almost 9:00AM before they finally got started. “You haven’t seen the pool yet! Let go that way and out the side gate.” Jason rode off toward the rear of the compound with Eli. Oskar and Hannah were right behind them. Einstein, especially energetic this morning, ran back and forth between them.

“Well, Hannah! Are we going to have fun today?”

“I don’t know, Oskar. I’m deliberately not looking ahead.”

“You can do that?”

“I can do anything I want, Oskar. You should know that by now.”

They rode up next to the pool and onto the deck. Hannah gasped. “The deck around the pool is made of the same white stone! How beautiful! And look at all the lawn chairs and tables, and barbeque pits. What fun this is going to be! And look, Oskar! The bottom of the pool is white too.” She slowed down and stood up on her pedals to get a better look.

He pulled up beside her. “Wow! You’re right, Hannah. I bet it’ll be hard to keep clean...”

She leaned toward him and at just the right instant, gave him a gentle nudge on the shoulder as he passed by. He tried to regain his balance by turning his wheel to the right – which normally would have done the trick, but he ran out of deck and slipped off the edge into the pool, where he and his bike landed upright and sank beneath the surface with a soft ‘ploop.’ Einstein, without hesitation, leaped in after him.

The first thing he heard when his head broke the surface was Eli, laughing hysterically. Hannah was laughing too, but at a discrete distance away, poised to flee at any moment. . “I could have been hurt, Hannah,” he sputtered, trying to reclaim some dignity. Einstein swam over, licked his face and put his paws on his shoulders, pushing him back underwater. When he popped to the surface again, his dignity in shreds, all he could smell was wet dog. He sighed a resigned sigh, let go of his bike, and guided Einstein over to the side of the pool, where Eli and Jason, still laughing, pulled him up on the deck. “Go shake off next to Hannah, Einstein,” Oskar whispered. Einstein just stood there grinning at him.

He dove down, retrieved his bike and worked his way back to the side of the pool “Jason, give me a hand,” he huffed.

Jason knelt down, grabbed Oskar’s bike and carefully lifted it out of the water. “Whew! I was worried, Oskar. But there’s not a scratch on it. It’ll be just fine, once we dry it off.”

“What about me?!” he scrambled out of the pool dripping wet, glaring at Hannah.

“You’re fine, Oskar. I saw it all beforehand.”

He glowered at her. “Now I have to go back and change! And you all are just going to have to wait!”

Hannah pulled a bag out of her backpack. “No you won’t, Oskar. I brought you a change of clothes. Eli helped me pick them out.”

“Eli? You were in on this?” he couldn’t believe it.

She grinned at him. “No, Oskar. Hannah just told me we would need a change of clothes for you, but wouldn’t tell me why. I just thought...”

“Okay, okay!” he snatched them away from Hannah. “You all go on outside the gate. I’ll join you in a minute.” He pulled his wet shirt off over his head, wrung it out and hung it on the back of a lawn chair.

“Why, Oskar? Everyone here has seen you naked, but me. What’s the big deal?” She walked around him, examining him carefully. “I’ve seen Eli naked; you’ve seen Eli naked; Jason’s seen you naked; Jason and I have seen each other naked, at least back when we were five.” She folded her arms across her chest and grinned at him. “Even Einstein has seen you naked.”

For a moment, he looked like a deer caught in her headlights. Then he smirked. “Okay, Hannah. You win.” He slipped his shoes and socks off, unbuckled his pants, stepped out of them and dropped them with a wet smack onto the deck. “Next!” he announced as he reached for his briefs.

Hannah folded. She turned around and covered her eyes. Oskar smiled triumphantly and stepped out of his briefs, then slowly and matter-of-factly dried himself off. He reached for his clothes but was instantly soaked again, as Einstein chose that very moment to shake himself off. Unlike the pool, the dog spray was cold. “Einstein! You traitor!”

Finally finished, Einstein strolled over and sat down in front of Hannah. “Good dog!” she whispered. She knelt down and rubbed his ears.

Oskar sighed, dried himself off again, and put his clean clothes on.

“Okay, Hannah. I’m fully clothed now. But you do realize I could have easily slipped up behind you and thrown you in the pool while you were standing there with your back to me, don’t you?”

“You...wouldn’t!” she still had her back to him with her hands over her eyes. “Eli? Is he really dressed?”

“He is, Hannah.”

She turned around slowly, looked up at him, and blushed. “We’re even now, Oskar. Okay?”

“Okay, Hannah. But I still think I’m a bit ahead of you.” He winked at her.

Eli handed him her backpack. “Now that I know why you needed a change of clothes, you can lug this around for us.” She smiled at him, hopped on her bike and disappeared through the gate with Jason.

“Any more surprises, Hannah?” They started off together.

“If I told you, they wouldn’t be surprises then, would they?” Hannah kind of liked the new position she now held in their little group. Even though she couldn’t really fly yet, she could still hold her own. And in spite of how close they all were, she now felt she was their equal at last, and could finally pay her own way.

They circled back around the compound to the northeast and swung around the low cliffs to the beach. The ship, off to the right, looked almost deserted now. Only one man was even visible in the area and he sat at the foot of the gangway, feet propped up on a wooden crate.

“Now, HE has a cushy job.”

Hannah laughed. “But not very challenging, huh?” They rode on together, not the least concerned that Jason and Eli were a fair distance ahead of them. Einstein seemed unconcerned too, and was content exploring all the new smells, turning over rocks, and watching the small crabs scurry away, claws clicking menacingly.

Eli and Jason were out of sight of the dock almost as soon as they turned west onto the gravelly beach between the ocean and the cliffs. Surprisingly, the coarse beach sand was quite firm and made for a rather smooth ride, even though they had to watch carefully for sudden dips and rises, a result of beach erosion from the summer storm runoffs. Even here, there were small easily-accessible caves and crevasses in the hard rocky soil of the low cliffs, but nothing like on the south side, where the cliffs were granite and the caves were worthy of being called caves. As they rode along the base of the cliffs, they could plainly see the effects of the sea on the deep green island hills, which sloped smoothly down toward the sea and then dropped abruptly to the beach where centuries of erosion had savagely torn away the beautifully sloped hillside, stripping away the thin skin of emerald green grass and exposing the raw flesh of the island.

“I wonder how long it’ll take the sea to finish the island off?” Jason mused.

“I was thinking the same thing, Jason. It kind of makes you wonder about all the things you think of as being permanent, like our new, beautiful homes, the new village, with all the people just beginning their open-ended lives with their families, all the while the island is slowly being reclaimed by the sea.”

“Ever since you made immortality possible for us all, Eli, I’ve been thinking about things like this more and more often. It’s all relevant now. Some of us could actually last long enough to see it happen. And it would be so sad. But the thing that’s hard for me to understand is that, our lives, because they might last that long, seem even more precious to me. Because we’ll have so much more to lose if we die.”

“You’re right, Jason. I hadn’t thought of it quite like that before. But then, you have the advantage. You’re two years older than any of us. You’re really already an adult, if you add in all the things that have happened to you because of me.”

“I wouldn’t trade the experience for anything.” He reached over and squeezed her hand. “I love talking to you. You’re so ... ageless.”

“I’m...not sure what that means, Jason, but thanks.”

He hesitated. “I’m sorry Eli. I’m sorry I frightened you last night. I never imagined...”

“You’re sweet Jason. But it wasn’t your fault.”

“But you’ll accept my apology anyway?”

“I will!” she smiled at him.

“What are they doing up there?” Hannah stood up on her pedals and craned her neck.

“Probably waiting for us, Hannah. But let them wait. I’m in no hurry.

“Me neither, Oskar.” She giggled. “Are you still mad at me?”

“I could never be mad at you...for long. Besides, I kind of started it.”

“But you got me good, Oskar. You really got me good. And I couldn’t let you get away with it.”

He sighed. “I know, Hannah. I’m just glad it’s over. I was getting tired of looking over my shoulder.”

“Oskar? Do you think we can be happy here? I mean, forever? I mean...”

“I don’t know, Hannah. Maybe I’ll have a better answer after we’ve grown up. That is, if we grow up.”

“What do you mean, Oskar? We ARE growing up. Aren’t we?”

“I don’t know, Hannah. I’ve had my doubts lately. And being around you is a constant reminder of what we’re leaving behind. You must realize that really, you’re the youngest of us all. And I’m next. We’re the kids in the family.”

“What about Jason? He’s only two years older than me. And you’re 14 years older.”

“Not really, Hannah. Jason is grown up. Can’t you tell? And I’m still just 14. Like you. Eli is...what Eli is; sometimes 14, sometimes...much older. And when she’s older, I feel...protective for some reason. I worry about how her past will affect her when she’s old enough to fully understand what she did to survive. It kind of scares me.”

“I know, Oskar. And last night, I tried to see...I tried to see what our lives would be like when we’re all eighteen. But I couldn’t. Everything was gray. I couldn’t even see six months ahead. Why do you suppose that is?”

“I don’t know Hannah; perhaps you’re too inexperienced at it. Maybe it’s not fully developed yet and won’t be until you drink more Ejuice. But I can’t shake the feeling that you need to be really careful when you do it. You might see something awful, and it might be something you can’t do anything about. How would that make you feel?”

“I’m not going to stop looking just because of that, Oskar. That would be kind of ... selfish, don’t you think?” The more she thought about it, the more protective of them all she felt. At last she could really contribute to their safety, and she wasn’t about to back off now. “If I had this before, you never would have been kidnapped, Oskar. Don’t you see? I have to look!” she took a deep breath. “And you’re going to help me, Oskar. You’re going to give me Ejuice.” Her voice was almost a whisper now. It had suddenly become clear to her. She had to do this, with or without her mom’s approval.

“We should to talk to Eli and Jason first, Hannah. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes. But how do you feel, Oskar? What do you think?”

He hesitated, trying to anticipate what Eli might say.

“No, Oskar. I want to know what YOU think. Without Eli.”

And why not, he thought to himself. “Okay, Hannah; I’ll tell you what I think. I’d give it to you in an instant.” He reached into the backpack. “In fact...”

She took the bottle from him and rewarded him with the most beautiful pixie grin he had seen since last night. “Wow! Oskar, I...”

“Hannah, sometimes you’re so much like Eli, I can’t...” he whispered hoarsely.

“Then you’re going to really like this.” She handed the bottle back to him. “Let’s wait. Until we talk to Eli and Jason.” She nailed him again with The Grin. He stood there with his mouth open as she peddled slowly up the beach. “Oskar? Are you coming? Einstein! Don’t dawdle!”

He recovered quickly, hopped back on his bike and hurried to catch up. “What about Jack? Are you going to talk to Jack?”

“No! Not Jack. He wouldn’t let me do it, I know. And not just because of Mom. He just...wouldn’t. So I can’t tell him.”

By the time they reached Eli and Jason, Eli had already been briefed by Oskar. Hannah could tell by the worried look on her face.

Chapter 43: The Cave

Ultimately, Jason was the hard-sell. But Eli knew that would be the case. After all, Jason was an adult now. And Hannah was, above all, his little sister. They continued down the beach in a heated debate.

“I don’t like it Hannah. You’d be violating Mom’s trust.”

“But Mom’s wrong, Jason! You know that! And this is too important.”

“I’m not sure how important it is, Hannah. We got along just fine without your ability before now.”

“Except Eli would be dead if I didn’t have it. And Oskar wouldn’t have been kidnapped if I had it then.”

Jason sighed. “You’re right, Hannah. On all counts. But I still don’t like it.”

“Consider it the lesser of two evils, Jason. Which choice is more likely to produce the worst results?”

“Unknown, Oskar. And your attempts to sound mature are not convincing. Your real motives are transparent.”

Oskar frowned. “What are my motives, then?”

“They’ve both got you wrapped around their little fingers. You’d do anything they asked of you, without question.”

“I resent that! Hannah asked me what I thought, and I told her. Because I trust her, and because she’s always right on the important stuff.”

“She’s always right on the ‘important stuff?’ What does that even mean? She’s only fourteen for God’s sake!”

“And you’re getting too big for your britches, Jason. You’re only sixteen.”

“You’re right, Oskar. I’m only sixteen. I can’t expect you all to give me the same benefit of the doubt you give your Mom and Dad—or ours. But we made a deal. It’s all of us, or it’s no Ejuice. So, you see, you have to convince me, like it or not.” He sped down the beach, throwing up a spray of wet sand. Einstein, sensing that something was amiss, took off after him.

“Turn left after the big red rock, Jason!” Hannah called after him. “We’re going to have our picnic there!”

Oskar grinned at her. “I thought you weren’t going to look ahead, Hannah.”

“I wasn’t. But I was afraid someone would say something bad, so I looked.”

“And?”

She smiled at him. “I can’t tell you, Oskar. It...might change things.”

They rode slowly up the beach, reluctant to confront Jason again too soon. Eli knew they had really hurt his feelings with their attacks. “I’m sorry, Hannah. I didn’t mean to get him mad.”

“Me too, Hannah. I shouldn’t have said what I said. He just got me so mad with his condescending attitude.”

“It’s okay. He’s tough. And he knows we don’t mean it. He’ll be fine.”

In about five minutes, they rounded the red rock. “Look, Eli! A pretty little valley!” Hannah said, excitedly.

As they passed through the U-shaped notch they spotted Jason, who had already laid out the big blanket at the far end and set the lunch basket in the center. Einstein spotted them and barked excitedly.

The whole miniature valley was wall-to-wall deep green, a result of the short, soft grass covering the valley floor and actually flowing up the steep sides. At the top, it sharply contrasted with the longer coarse grass of the island’s hills. The battle zone between the two species was a thick line of both grasses butted up against one another in an apparent stalemate at the crest of the ridge surrounding the tiny valley.

“You can sure pick ‘em, Hannah. This is absolutely beautiful! And there’s no wind, and the sun covers the whole valley.” Jason had obviously gotten over his anger. He peeled off his shirt and lay back on the warm grass.

Oskar quickly did the same and flopped down beside him. “Jason? Do you think your mom would be disappointed in Hannah if she did this?”

“Yes Oskar. I do. And I wouldn’t want Hannah to have to pay that price if there weren’t a good reason for it.”

“I know you’re just trying to protect her, Jason. I really do. But I think you’re underestimating the importance of her ability.”

“Convince me.”

“According to Sava, Eli could have died or been killed countless times since they began watching her, if it hadn’t been for Gudmund’s abilities. I never would have met her, and you

would never have met any of us. Your entire life would be on a different track right now if it weren't for this 'ability.'"

"I hadn't thought of it quite that way before, Oskar, but still..."

"The Builderbriars, Jason. Sava is certain we haven't seen the last of them. Hannah could be our only hope. They've been around for centuries, and have taken on and defeated people who are much more ruthless and brutal than any of us, or even Jonathan."

"But not Sava, Oskar." He grinned at him, happy to be finally discussing this whole thing rationally.

"Sava's good, Jason. But Dad and I still got kidnapped. He can't be everywhere at once. But Hannah, with her ability, can. If it were as well-developed as Gudmund's, nothing could get past us. Nothing!"

"I don't know, Oskar. If I remember correctly, things got past him too. And past his father."

"You're right, Jason. I misspoke. Nothing's perfect. If you think this has to be a guaranteed solution to all our problems before it's worth it, then I guess you're right. She shouldn't risk it."

Eli and Hannah quietly emptied the basket, laid out the food and let them talk, afraid that if they spoke up at this point, Jason, clearly outnumbered, might feel under attack again.

"It's not just a matter of principal, Oskar. She's only fourteen. Is she really old enough to understand the risk? Legally, I'm not even old enough to make some choices, and certainly not ones that would risk my life."

"And yet, you have, Jason. And so has Hannah, many times over, saving ours in the process. In my mind, she's earned the right to risk her own life for what she firmly believes in. I don't feel that I personally have the right to stop her. In fact, she shouldn't even have to ask us."

Jason lay back on the blanket, stared up at the sky for a moment, then looked at Hannah. "What do you think, Hannah Bananah? Am I being overprotective of my little sister?"

"Yes. But it's okay, Jason. I understand."

Jason was quiet for a moment. "Oskar, give her the bottle. But if nothing comes of it, or if anything happens that ... scares me, you have to promise to stop, Hannah, and not do it again until Jack says it's okay." He felt funny, playing the 'Jack' card on her, but he was outnumbered and needed all the help he could get.

"I promise, Jason."

Oskar handed her the bottle. She took it from him and drank it on the spot, without hesitation. When she was finished, she put her arms around Jason and squeezed him tight. “Thank you, big brother,” she whispered.

“Let’s eat. I’m hungry.” Oskar grabbed a sandwich and dug in.

When they were finished, they all lay back and soaked in the sun. Jason and Oskar fell silent, content to just let their food digest and relax a bit, but Hannah’s mind was racing. Just like two nights ago, she could feel things being shuffled around in her mind. She took Eli’s hand in hers, hoping it would make it easier for her to feel what was happening. She was excited, but a bit afraid too. *I’m here, Hannah.*

Suddenly, it was as though they were both watching a home movie of their picnic. It could be now, or it could be a bit later, there was no telling for sure, although the sun did seem to be a bit lower in the sky.

They had just finished cleaning up, when they heard Einstein bark at some bushes about half-way back down the valley, on the east side.

“What’s he barking at? Einstein! Come here!” When he didn’t respond, Hannah strode impatiently over to him, grabbed him by the collar and... “Eli! There’s a cave here! Einstein’s found a cave!”

The others rushed over, but Hannah had already disappeared into the darkness. “Wait for us,” Eli called out. Einstein, content to having made the discovery, sat back on his haunches and watched them all work their way around the thick bushes to the entrance.

The passage was narrow, but easy to navigate. However in a few places, it slanted over 15 degrees from the vertical toward the heart of the island, making it a bit awkward for them, since they couldn’t navigate without using their hands against the passageway wall to keep their balance. But since it was relatively straight, it was still lit well enough for them to see where they were going. Within about 10 meters, it opened out into a small chamber with an arched roof and flat stone floor. But what caught their attention was a relatively modern folding table and two folding chairs set up in the middle of the room.

They looked at each other. “I don’t like this, Hannah. What can it mean?” Eli was a bit frightened in spite of herself.

“Look, Eli!” There were two electric lanterns against the wall that looked brand-new. Hannah reached down and turned one on. The room was suddenly filled with light.

“Turn it off, Hannah! We need to tell Jonathan about this! And we need to make sure nothing is disturbed,” Jason said. “Don’t touch anything!” They slowly and carefully retraced their steps until they were in the sunlight once again.

Hannah sat bolt upright. “Eli! What was that?”

“I don’t know, Hannah, but...” she looked directly at the brush where they had seen the cave entrance, but there was no indication it even existed. Einstein was still asleep in the middle of the blanket.

“What are you two up to?” Oskar sat up and stretched.

“Hannah had a ‘vision.’” She glanced worriedly at Jason. “Nothing bad, Jason,” she assured him, “but definitely interesting. In her vision, Einstein found a cave.” She pointed to the brush. “Behind those bushes.”

“I don’t see anything, Hannah. Are you sure?” Oskar got there first, pulled back the bushes, and gasped. “Wow! You’re right Hannah! It’s really here. Jason! Come look!”

“Be careful, Oskar. Don’t touch anything. We don’t want them to know we were here.”

“Who, Hannah? Who don’t we want to know?”

“I don’t know, Jason! There’s a table and chairs in there. And 2 electric lanterns. I don’t think it’s kids.”

Oskar and Jason disappeared into the crack.

“Tell Papa, Hannah. And Mama.”

“I did, Eli. Jonathan and your Papa are on their way. Jonathan said he knows where we are.”

A few minutes later, they heard the whirring of an electric cart. Seconds later, Jonathan leaned over the rim of the valley. “How on earth did you kids find this gully? I was here almost a year before I discovered it.”

“It’s a valley, Jonathan. Not a gully. It’s too pretty to be a gully,” Hannah said, a bit irritated.

“Papa! You’re here!” Eli scrambled up the bank, reached up, and let Papa pull her the rest of the way. “There’s a cave, and we found things in it that worried us.”

“We’ll take a look, Eli. Hannah, tell the boys to come out, and not to touch anything.”

We didn’t touch anything, Dad. I promise. We’re on our way out now.

Richard and Jonathan picked their way down the side of the gully. “Be careful, Mr. Dawson. Don’t hurt the grass.” Hannah watched their descent carefully. Eli leaped off the beach side of the cliff and came back in through the notch.

The four of them sat on the blanket and waited. Finally Richard and Jonathan emerged from the cave, talking quietly.

“What do you think, Dad?”

“Oskar, you all did the right thing. Jonathan is going to have a surveillance camera installed in a discrete location outside the cave, and a microphone somewhere inside, if he can. I think that, at least for now, it would be better if you stayed away from here until further notice.”

“We’re pretty sure it’s not the children,” Jonathan continued. “They’re not allowed in this area, precisely because of all the gullies and pits here on the north side of the island. Moreover, the table and chairs, and the lanterns are not of a type issued on the island. Someone’s on the way right now to try and lift fingerprints and compare them to everyone currently on the island or who have ever been here, although I suspect we’ll be lucky if there’s a match.”

“Einstein found the cave, Dr. Dawson. It was just luck. I doubt that we would have spotted it.” Jason rubbed Einstein’s ears.

Eli and Hannah looked at each other and grinned. Jason was clearly a coconspirator now.

“Well then, thank you Einstein!” Dawson ruffled his fur. “You shall be suitably rewarded for your diligence when you get home.”

§

“Psst! Eli! Are you awake?”

Oskar rolled over and sat up. “What’s wrong, Hannah? What are you doing here?” He glanced at the clock: 3:00AM.

“I...saw something, Oskar.” She reached over Eli and took his hand in hers.

Eli yawned, stretched, and opened her eyes. “Get in, Hannah.” She lifted the blanket. Hannah kicked off her slippers and slid in beside her. “What did you see?”

“I saw the island, Eli. But I don’t know when I saw it. I mean I know I saw it a few minutes ago, but I don’t know WHEN in its future saw it.”

“And?”

“It...wasn’t there! Or at least, most of it wasn’t. And there was a ship.”

“What do you mean? There was a ship where the island is? That doesn’t make any sense at all. What kind of ship?”

“Not a flying saucer, I hope.” Oskar grinned at her.

“No, Oskar! It was white and sleek and big and very modern looking, but a regular floating ship nonetheless.” She grabbed both their hands and closed her eyes. The view came into focus slowly, distorted as though they were seeing it through an old window pane. The vantage point seemed to be south of the mainland, and hundreds of feet in the air over the ocean. Oskar recognized the silhouette of the mainland coastline immediately. He had seen it often enough from the plane window as it circled the island before landing. But below, in the rough shape of the island’s perimeter, was an atoll-like island remnant, as though through the eons, the island had finally sunk almost entirely into the ocean. “I don’t see any ship, Hannah.”

“It was there, Oskar. I saw it before. But it seems to be gone now. Whenever ‘now’ is.”

“Very mysterious, Hannah. What do you think it means? Were you trying to look at the island in the future when you saw this?” Oskar propped himself up on his elbow.

“No. I was trying to see where we all were when we turn 18 in four more years.”

“Well, it looks like you overshot your mark by a half-million years or so.” Oskar playfully punched her on the shoulder.

“I guess that must be it, Oskar. I have a lot to learn yet about my gift.”

Eli sighed. “It is kind of sad though. Jason and I were talking about exactly that this morning when we started out and saw where the waves had eaten into the beautiful hills. I just wonder where we all went, and if we’re even still alive. Can you see anything about that, Hannah?”

“Nope. Everything’s gray, except the island.”

“Maybe more Ejuice would help?” He knew she had been drinking it regularly for over a week now, but...

“Maybe, Oskar. I’ll try more in the morning.” She snuggled up against Eli, flicked Oskar’s ear, and after easily fending off his half-hearted attempt at retaliation, drifted off to sleep.

§

“There you are! Hannah, next time leave a note on your pillow when you leave in the middle of the night. Your mom and dad were worried.”

Hannah sat up and rubbed her eyes. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Dawson. Eli’s bed is just so comfortable, I fell asleep. I didn’t mean to stay all night. I just saw...” her voice trailed off. She realized she had almost spilled the beans. This subterfuge was going to be harder than she thought.

Elaine seemed to take no notice. “It’s okay, Hannah. Just remember next time. I told them you were probably here. I’ll let them know.” She quietly closed the door behind her.

Hannah lay back on Eli's pillow and closed her eyes. She opened them suddenly when she felt something furry crawling rapidly up her arm. For a split second, she looked straight into its shiny black eyes – then she screamed, flicked its disgustingly soft, damp and furry body off her shoulder, rolled out of bed and landed hard on the floor. “Eli! There's something hairy and awful in your bed!” She leaped to her feet, saw Oskar peeking over Eli's shoulder grinning from ear to ear, and connected the dots instantly.

“What was that, Oskar?! It was disgusting! I could feel its tiny feet on my arm!” She watched him intently, like a predator, counting on him to let his guard down for just an instant; all the time she would need.

“Just a bit of wire, a really big clump of Einstein's fur, and a couple of Mom's old buttons,” he boasted. I guess it worked, huh?”

“It sure did!” she grinned at him. “Show me Oskar. Where is it? Maybe I can try it on Jason.” She tensed her muscles, now almost impossibly strong after all the Ejuice she had been drinking, and waited. She ran her tongue over her rapidly-sharpening teeth in anticipation.

“I think it flew over here somewhere...” he reached across Eli and fumbled for it under the blanket.

In a sudden blur of pink fairies, she was on him, hissing and snarling. Eli saw her coming and slipped gracefully off the end of the bed just in the nick of time.

Oskar lay there in shock for a second, mouth open and eyes wide, no more than a couple inches from the most awful set of fangs he had ever seen. His upper arms were pinned firmly to the bed by a set of magnificent rusty-red claws.

He screamed.

“Say Uncle!!” she hissed. She pressed her fangs against his neck. He grabbed her wrists but could tell immediately that he was outmatched. Simply put, her arms were steel-strong and unyielding.

“Uncle,” he gasped.

“I didn't hear you! What did you say?” she ran her tongue back and forth over his jugular.

“Uncle! For God's sake, Uncle! Uncle!” he screeched hoarsely.

She sat back on her haunches, flexed her claws a couple of times, then pulled her knees up to her chest. “What do you think, Eli? Are the colors nice?”

“Perfect Hannah!”

“I was going to make them pink, but it seemed...inappropriate somehow – out of character, you might say.”

“I agree! And I’m jealous!”

Oskar sat up slowly, “I have to say...”

“Yeth, Othkar?” She bared what was left of her rapidly-shrinking fangs.

He grinned at her. “I have to say, your fairy pajamas were the only reason I didn’t pee all over myself.”

“Eewww! You wouldn’t have!”

“Just remember that next time – if there ever is a next time.” He shuddered. He watched her morph back into ‘Eli,’ and smiled in spite of himself when she became her usual cute self again. The contrast made it difficult for him to understand how she could have frightened him so much just a few moments ago.

She smiled back at him. “Do you forgive me Oskar? Eli has been teaching me for days now, and I just couldn’t resist, and you got me sooo mad...”

“Remind me not to get you mad again, Hannah.”

“I promise I’ll never do that to you again. Or anyone else. It felt...really strange at the end. I don’t like it, Eli. It made me feel awful inside for a moment.” She found herself unable to look directly at her; instead, her gaze turned to the open window.

It didn’t go unnoticed. “I understand, Hannah. I didn’t like it either back when I had to do it. But I...sort of...” *What? What did I ‘sort of’? Brush it off? Not give a damn? And now, even Hannah can’t look at me when she really thinks about what I did!*

“Enough!” Oskar slid over and put his arm around her protectively. She laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Eli! I just don’t know when to shut up.”

“It’s not your fault, Hannah. It’s just that the older I get, the more I think about...all that I did. It’s not your fault.” *And I’m only fourteen. What will it be like when I’m sixteen? Or twenty-six? Jack’s and Mama’s age?*

“Shhh! Stop thinking, Eli. Hannah? Help!”

“Eli, it’s not your fault! You know that, don’t you? We know that! Your Mama and Papa know it! My Mama and Papa know it!”

“But I wonder if Sava knows it, Hannah?” she said softly. She slowly dressed herself and went downstairs, alone. Hannah and Oskar stood at the window, watching her walk slowly up White Road toward the village.

“Shall I go after her, Oskar? This was my fault!”

“No, Hannah. She’ll be back in a few minutes. She just needs to be alone for a little while.

§

Adrian stepped back cautiously as Dr. Franklin, at his instruction, put the petri dish on the sunlit window sill. His jaw dropped when it burst into flames, and his heart pounded with excitement. *At last! Now we’re getting somewhere.*

“What does it mean, Adrian? Where on earth did you get the original blood sample in the first place?”

“Need to know basis, Doctor. You understand you are to tell no one about this?”

“Yes. Of course. But...”

“No one, Doctor!” he repeated menacingly.

Chapter 44: The Signs of the Future

“What are you doing, Eli?” Oskar paused a moment at her open door on his way downstairs.

She glanced up at him and smiled. “I’m just trying on my wedding ring, Oskar. I wanted to see if it fit yet.”

“I thought you were going to wait, Eli. You know, until we’re eighteen.”

She avoided his eyes. “I know, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? And I was curious. I know my hands are bigger than they were, just like everything else.” She opened the box, carefully turned the ring over in her hands a couple of times, then slipped it on her finger. It fit perfectly.

“Wow! I guess that means we can get married any time, huh Eli?” He grinned at her.

“I guess so, Oskar.” She had an odd look in her eyes. “I guess so.”

“I wish I had a glass slipper around somewhere for you to try on too, Eli. Maybe I’ll check with Hannah.”

Eli laughed. “If anyone has one, she does. But what are you going to do if it doesn’t fit?”

“I’ll make you a pair that does.” He smiled at her, blushed, then disappeared down the stairs.

Eli stood there a moment, looking at the ring on her finger and thinking about all the different paths their lives together could take. She had given it a great deal of thought, and decided she wasn’t sure she liked the idea that Hannah could now, at least sometimes, see into the future. She knew she would be tempted to ask her, but she wasn’t sure she would always want to hear the answers. She decided that she and Hannah needed to discuss it thoroughly. Before it was too late.

§

“Site three has been compromised, Adrian. It’s been discovered.”

“What? How!?”

“The children found it somehow on one of their island explorations. Archaeogenetics has set up surveillance cameras.”

“Unfortunate. And lucky for us, since the third and smallest device hadn’t been placed yet. But the other two are still secure?”

“Mine is totally secure, although a bit less so than the first. The first is completed and sealed off, and hasn’t been touched for months. They’ll never find it.”

Adrian paced back and forth. *Damn! Everything has been going so smoothly, I should have expected something to go wrong. No matter. The two remaining sites should be quite enough to do the job. And they'll be a bit harder to find, even for inquisitive pseudo-vampire children.*

"You are going to have to be very careful now. They'll be looking for someone on the island; someone on the inside. Just do your job for now. No additional forays until further notice"

"As you wish."

"Do your best to find out what countermeasures they'll put in place now that they've been alerted. We absolutely have to be able to proceed undetected, or else we can't guarantee the powers that be that this will work. It was hard enough to convince them to try something so bold in the first place. If there is even a whisper of doubt, they'll pull the plug, even now. We can't let that happen!"

§

School had finally become part of the daily routine. There were 21 children in all, ranging from six to sixteen years of age, and all of them spent most of the day in the large one-classroom schoolhouse, designed by Jonathan himself. It comprised four large rooms in total: the classroom, the computer lab, the theatre and the lunchroom; all but the lunchroom simultaneously occupied on a loose, sometimes unpredictable schedule spontaneously generated by Jonathan, Richard, Elaine and the tireless, infinitely patient professional teacher, ostensibly hired to keep all the adults in line and their egos in check, Mrs. Perkins. The building itself was situated near the end of White Road on the north side of the valley, thus for almost all of them, the trip to school in the morning was uphill, by bicycle or on foot.

The first thing they had all noticed on their first day of school was the parking lot. As usual, teachers and staff (as described above) got the best spots, but the others were first come, first served. What was different about them was that the widest would barely accommodate a small electric cart; all the rest were for two- or three-wheeled, usually self-propelled, vehicles. No exceptions, other than the loading dock at the rear of the school. The path from the lot to the school entrance was covered, and the overhang sheltered the first fifteen parking spaces; more incentive for students to get to school early in case it rained. No one wants to sit down on a wet bicycle seat after school, Jonathan had reasoned. It was also designed so on those frequent rainy days, the students could all shake themselves off a bit before going inside, another of Jonathan's ideas, which he was always willing to point out to anyone who would listen.

October was nearly upon them and the weather reflected the season; cold, and wet. The rain had just let up, so Eli and Hannah lost no time in running for the bike racks. Hannah adjusted her backpack, and just before Eli pulled away, put her hand on her shoulder. "Eli, your home is abandoned. And so is Jack's."

"What? What do you mean, Hannah?" Eli straddled her bike, a puzzled look on her face.

"I saw it, Eli. Your beautiful house was dirty and stained, there were dead branches on the roof and porch, the grass in the front yard was tall and uncut, and all your Papa's beautiful flowers

were dead. And across the street, Jack's house looked the same. And there was a broken window pane on the front porch."

"When, Hannah? When?"

"During history, Eli. Mrs. Perkins was talking about the Germans, and the controversial theory that they deliberately allowed the British Expeditionary Force to escape from Dunkirk and why, and I kind of...dozed off."

"No, no! I mean, when were the houses empty?"

"I don't know for sure, Eli, but your mom's blue car was in the garage. I saw it. And the leaves were off the trees, but I could see a few buds just starting..."

"Come on, Hannah! We have to tell Papa! Something is wrong! Papa has someone looking after the house, and so does Jack's mom. This could never happen! Unless..."

"Unless what, Eli?" she hurried to catch up with her.

"I don't know, Hannah! I don't know!" They sped off together down White Road.

They pulled up in front of the Archaeogenetics Building, where Papa and Jack were waiting for them. "Tell me again, Hannah. Are there any clues as to when the houses were in this state of disrepair? Can you look again? Perhaps look in the neighbor's mailboxes, or at a newspaper on their lawn?"

"I never thought of that Jack! Let me try..." she sat down on the step, put her head in her hands, and closed her eyes. "...April, Jack! April 18, 1997. There's a newspaper on the Anderson's lawn!"

Jack and Rich looked at each other. "Impossible, Jack. Something terrible must have happened...or is going to happen. And soon! Unless we can stop it. Hannah, look again. Does our now being aware of this future change anything?"

"No, Dr. Dawson. It's still the same."

"What do we do now, Papa?"

"We figure it out, Eli. Hannah? Contact everyone and tell them to meet us in the conference room ASAP. Jack, call Jonathan."

§

The conference room had never held so many at once, although it had been designed to accommodate 16 or more.

All thirteen of them were there, yet the room was deathly quiet after Richard explained what Hannah had seen, and what it might mean.

Maggie broke the silence. “Richard? What this means to me is that both of my sons will be gone in less than seven months! We have to do something!”

Elaine had never seen her so frightened before.

“We’re not going anywhere, Mom.” Henry put his arm around her.

“Hannah? You’ll let us know if there are any changes to your vision? Can you do that?”

“I...I can Jack,” her voice was almost inaudible.

“Now. What could be the more likely reason for why we would have abandoned our homes in such a manner? And not only abandoned them, but completely stopped our contracted maintenance of them in our absence. If they were in such a state of disrepair in mid-April, when were they actually abandoned? The event that brought this on had to have been several months before, making it probably January or February at the latest. No more than four months from now. We don’t have much time to figure this out.”

“Our contract is a yearly one, Jack. Richard and I merely expanded the contract we already had to include routine care of the pool, his flowers and shrubbery, and the house in general while we were away. Automatic payments are arranged through Barclays. And you set yours up with the same agency, didn’t you Maggie?”

“Yes I did, Elaine.”

“That means either the contracts were canceled, or the bank accounts were frozen. Or both. Only then, if the agency couldn’t contact us, would they interrupt service.” Richard was really getting worried now. “That could bring the event back another month at least. To December, perhaps.”

“Jonathan, are you sure the tape copies have been securely placed in the proper locations?” Jack cursed himself for not having following up on this himself.

“Yes...and no, Jack. We picked seven sites, but only two are currently fully operational.”

“Jonathan, this was our number one priority! I thought we had made that perfectly clear. Blackmail is our only leverage against these predators. They’ve clearly had someone on the inside for some time now, at least intermittently, and it’s much easier for whoever it is to get information on two locations than seven. I want all seven of them fully operational and automatic by the end of the week. Can you do that!?”

“I’ll try, Jack, but it’s complicated...”

“Sava? Could you give him a hand?”

“Of course, Jack. And you have my word; it’ll be fully operational in a week—one way or another.”

“Mama, I’m worried about what your car being there means. I just know you would never leave it. It was your first gift from Papa.”

Elaine smiled at her. “My second, Eli. Don’t forget the flowers. But you’re right. I would never abandon it. Never.”

Richard smiled as he thought about all the TLC she had given it all these years. He wasn’t even sure an original part was left on it. All he knew was that it looked as good as it had the day he gave it to her, when she took him on his first harrowing ride.

“Damn them all! Damn them to hell!” Sava threw his chair back and began pacing rapidly around the room. “Even with no further evidence, it’s clear that, at best, we’re all being detained somewhere, and at the worst, we’re all dead! The latter is far more likely, since it certainly wouldn’t be the first time they’ve crossed that line, for far less gain.”

“How could they possibly do such a thing without attracting attention, Sava? How could they possibly get away with it?” Jack was exasperated. He knew Sava must be right, but how?

“They couldn’t. Unless they were sure they had killed us all. No witnesses. No loose ends. It’s the way they operate.”

“Nonsense! There’s no possible way they could silence us all. This has gotten past the point of no return. There’s no going back and they know it. They could never contain the knowledge now. Too many people know.”

“Still a finite number, Doctor. And they’ve done worse. The tapes are only the tip of the iceberg. I’ve seen it myself.”

“And we may not have enough time left to figure it all out, unless we can get more information from Hannah.” Richard reached into his briefcase. “Livia? I know how you feel but I think it would be a very good idea if we...” He placed a bottle of Ejuice on the table in front of him.

“I don’t know, Richard...” Livia began.

“No! Hannah’s not like the rest of us. We don’t know how this will affect her in the long run. It’s not worth the risk!” Jack picked up the bottle. “Look at what it’s done to her already! After only one bottle, she has an ability that none of us have...”

“An ability that may be instrumental in saving our lives, Jack. And there seems to be no downside to it whatsoever.”

“But it’s not worth risking her life over. What does that say about all of us, that we would be willing to use her so!”

“Jack, please stop! Please!” Hannah rushed into his arms, tears in her eyes. “It’s too late anyway. I’ve already been using Ejuice now for weeks! That’s the only reason I saw what I saw!”

“What?! How...” Jack was dumfounded. He simply couldn’t believe she would do such a reckless thing. Or was he just being over-protective again? His head was swimming.

“Hannah was determined to do it, Jack. And we didn’t think we had the right to stop her after all she’s done. She did it because she saw...something else first. Eli’s death. And she was convinced she could do more to help.” Oskar took a breath. “And so we all agreed to give her some, but Jason made her promise to stop if anything bad happened. Then she saw Einstein find the cave. But he hadn’t yet. Hannah did. And so we kept giving her Ejuice. As much as she wanted.”

Jack looked at Hannah, saw the determination in her eyes at the same time he saw the deep dread she had that he might be disappointed in her. He sighed. He knew her determination was the stronger of the two. “It’s okay, Hannah. I really do understand. And you were brave to do it,” he whispered.

The tears welled up in her eyes and she put her arms around him. “I love you so,” she whispered.

He took her face in his hands. “Hannah, have you seen anything else? If you’ve been doing this for weeks, you must have seen something else. Think.”

“The island, Hannah. Tell them about the island.” Oskar was getting excited now. The feeling of purpose and the strength of all of them working together toward a common goal exhilarated him. It made him feel deeply content somehow, in spite of his knowing they might all be in grave danger.

“But...that won’t happen for a hundred thousand years, Oskar. Right?”

“But, the ship, Hannah. There was a ship. I don’t know if there would even be any recognizable ships in the world in a hundred thousand years!” *Why didn’t I think of that before?*

Hannah carefully described what she had seen, but for some reason it was harder to show them. The visions often didn’t transfer to others easily.

“An atoll? The composition of the island wouldn’t allow for such a unique subsidence, I think. Jonathan? Any thoughts?”

“None. Other than to verify the unlikelihood of such a future for our little island, even in a hundred thousand years.”

“What can it mean, then?” Nils drew a crude picture of a Phoenix Island-shaped atoll with a ship in the center, and handed it to Hannah. “Like this?”

Hannah nodded. “Like that, Dad, but there was more of the island on the west side, and it was open to the sea on the east side. And the ship was a bit smaller.”

“Could you try again, Hannah?” Jack squeezed her hand.

“Okay, Jack.” She sat down beside him, bowed her head, and concentrated as hard as she could.

And there it was. And this time it was as though she were really there. She could feel the warm sun on her back as she hovered several hundred feet above the island. The sun was almost directly overhead, and there, in the center of the atoll, was a sleek, white ship sitting motionless, tugging gently on its anchor chain, bow facing almost due east. There were two symbols on the side of the ship; one she knew she had seen before but couldn’t place right now; a bit like a Civil Defense sign for a bomb shelter, but it looked more like a three-bladed fan. The other...reminded her of a Klingon sword or more like a sort of Klingon version of a Ninja star. The first was yellow and black; the second, red and menacing looking.

“I see it, Jack! The ship has two symbols on the side!” She described them as best she could.

“Really Hannah, a Klingon Ninja star? Give me a break,” Jason kidded.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Hannah. Try to show us. Oskar? Maybe between the two of you...”

Oskar stepped up and took her hand. They both closed their eyes and bowed their heads. *You can do this, Hannah.*

Thanks for sticking up for me, Oskar. It means a lot to me. Oskar suddenly felt as though he was being jerked through a hole that was too small for him to fit through; then the sensation of falling, and finally, one of floating. And there they were, above the island together. The ship appeared below them, bow first this time; then slowly turned against the anchor chain with the changing current. The haziness inherent in her visions was almost gone now as a result of the both of them concentrating as with one mind. The ship was almost broadside now. And the images coalesced, then suddenly became crystal clear to them all:



Chapter 45: Time Surfing

Sava leaped to his feet. “I told you they would stop at nothing!” His rage was palpable, hitting Oskar and Hannah like a sledge hammer. And by proxy, everyone in the room felt his wrath. “I knew I should have killed Adrian when I had the chance!”

“Adrian is expendable, Sava; a small cog in the machinery. I’m sure there are plenty more where he came from.” Jack knew there was no point in regretting what they could do nothing about now. It would only distract them, and possibly divide them.

“Please, Sava! Don’t...” Eli closed her eyes and, in vain, put her hands over her ears. Only after seeing the look of anguish on her face, did Sava back down and take a deep breath.

Hannah was confused. “What do the symbols mean, Jack? Why is Sava so angry?”

“The first one is the warning symbol for radiation, Hannah. The second is the symbol for biological hazards.” *So Eli has now been reduced to a biological hazard.*

“My God! Richard, could they really have done such a thing?” Elaine was dumbfounded. In her worst nightmares she couldn’t imagine any civilized nation or group using nuclear weapons in this way.

“I guess we’re more of a threat to them than I ever imagined,” Jonathan scratched his head. “What do we do now?”

“We have to figure out how they did this...and stop them,” Richard stepped up to the blackboard. “Now, they either detonated a bomb over the island, unlikely on the face of it, or they smuggled a nuclear device or devices onto the island and detonated them remotely; a far more likely scenario, since we have possibly already discovered a potential location for such a device.” He paused a moment, then turned to Hannah. “Has anything changed as a result of our new knowledge?”

“No, Mr. Dawson. It hasn’t. The island is still gone.”

“How about our houses, Hannah?”

“They’re...they’re okay now. They look nice again.” She sighed with relief. “But Mrs. Dawson’s car isn’t in the garage anymore.”

“That’s probably because I decided to bring it to the island after your revelation, Hannah. And pay our maintenance fees in advance. I haven’t done it yet of course, but it’s the first thing I plan on doing when this meeting is over. From your new observation then, we can infer that we have some time left before Armageddon, at least.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Elaine. I think you should leave things as they are, as a sort of indicator. Bring the car if you wish, but it might be better to leave the contract alone.”

“You’re right, Rich. I wasn’t thinking. I’ll leave the car too. Better it sit there unattended than be vaporized here on the island if we fail.”

“Hannah? Has...”

“Everything is as it was before, Mr. Dawson. The car is back in the garage, and Jack’s window is broken again. Wow! This is amazing! Everything we say seems to change the future.”

“But only because we can immediately see the results of our choices, Hannah.” Dawson was just beginning to realize the power of Hannah’s new gift.

“Hannah? Is it difficult for you to see the future? Can you perhaps look at other things if we ask it of you?”

“It is getting easier, Mr. Dawson. Maybe I could if you asked me what to look for.”

“Can you see what Adrian will be doing in the future? Or visualize anything at the Builderbriar Conglomerate center?”

“...No. Not Adrian. But the room where they held Oskar has been repaired, or will be repaired soon. I can see that.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure we have enough data to understand why you can see one thing and not the other. But that was clearly the case with Gudmund’s father and Gudmund, if I remember correctly. Neither of them predicted the arrival of Alexander’s army, and similarly, neither of them could predict Gudmund Sr.’s death. And that’s about as up close and personal as you can get.”

Richard began drawing a diagram on the board. “I think we should come up with a list of possible countermeasures. We’ll go over each of them thoroughly, pick one, and run with it. If nothing changes, we’ll start again.”

It wasn’t long before over half the blackboard was covered with new ideas. Among them; Ramping up security, temporarily halting or eliminating home construction on the island, using Sava to investigate the BbC, implementing heavily-armed patrols of the island perimeter, and searching for other locations on the island where the BbC might be active.

“Richard, how could they possibly place a nuclear bomb in that cave? They must be huge, and the cave entrance was quite narrow.”

“You’re right, Elaine. I was thinking the same thing. I’ve heard rumors of the existence of large suitcase-sized nuclear weapons, but their yield would only be six kilotons at the most; hardly enough to level the island. They would need dozens of them to do the job.”

“Then How?”

“I don’t know. Something big enough to level the island would be almost impossible to hide, and even more impossible to bring to the island undetected. It seems as though there’s no solution.”

“Everything’s still the Same, Mr. Dawson.”

“Can you see if our stashes of the tapes will be completed successfully?”

She concentrated hard. Then, “They were...I mean, will be! In a week!” she smiled at Sava, who shrugged his shoulders. *What did you expect, Hannah?*

“And nothing else has changed?”

“No.”

“Then they’ve either figured out how to neutralize the effect of the tapes, or more likely, someone has gone rogue over at BbC,” Sava growled.

“What reason do you have to suspect that, Sava? They have to be quite stable to have remained undetected all these years.”

“Jack, if you weren’t so awfully young, your naiveté would offend me. But naiveté is what it is, and there’s no changing the mind of someone infected with it. The Roman Empire ruled the world for over 1000 years, and survived all that time in spite of some of the despots that headed the state for long periods of its history. The BbC is an ancient institution, reeking of tradition. Because of the preponderance of hoary old ideologues at the top, lately inspired to even greater purpose by the philosophy of Ayn Rand, it has enough inertia to easily survive a rogue or two. In fact their blind ideology invariably spawns them.”

“I agree with Sava, Jack. And if he’s right, we should approach this assuming that whoever they are want us and our discoveries buried, no matter what the cost.” Elaine smiled grimly at Rich, “Sava and I, because of our unique...life experiences, have a well-earned skepticism of the idea that good will ultimately triumph over evil.”

“But it did for you, Mama. And for Sava too!”

“Not yet, Eli.” Sava gripped her shoulder firmly. “Not yet.”

§

Jonathan, deep in thought, pressed the elevator button for the third basement. After three days, nothing had changed. No matter what track they followed, the island was still gone. The odd thing was that Hannah couldn’t firm up a time. It was almost as though the immensity and power of the event kept her from getting close enough to it to see it clearly. Or, as Richard had pointed out, perhaps all their attempts to foil the effort changed the timing often enough to confuse Hannah.

He looked up as the door opened, stepped out, bore immediately left down the hall and ...ran smack into someone racing for the elevator. "Roger! What on earth are you doing down here?"

Roger was an eccentric computer programmer and engineer, best known on the island for his gaming capabilities rather than his work. But Jonathan was one of the few who truly recognized his talents. In fact he was planning on involving him directly in the logistics of mass-producing and distributing the vaccine once it had become common knowledge.

"I was just checking to make sure our latest shipment of Intel processors had arrived. The new Pentium II, 266 MHz processors will make all the difference in the world, Jonathan." He could hardly contain his excitement.

"And I'm sure your hobby will benefit from the increased speed also, Roger." Jonathan grinned at him. "By the way, I've been meaning to talk to you about a new job you might find a bit more of a challenge. Come see me next Monday at around nine, and we'll talk about it."

"Yeah, sure." He grabbed the elevator door just before it closed. "I'll talk to you then."

Jonathan continued down the hall, a bit disappointed in Roger's lukewarm response. He had expected him to bombard him with questions, discussions of timetables, and worries about whether he would have to give up his current job, or if he could have them both. Roger was so energetic, they had initially thought he might be abnormally hyperactive, but they soon realized his work output benefited greatly as a result, so they willingly put up with his eccentricities.

He stepped into Shipping and Receiving, waved at the clerk, and pulled an invoice out of his shirt pocket. "Have my shipment of Geiger counters arrived yet, Clark? We need to get them distributed to the employees ASAP."

"Yeah, they're here, Doctor. Henry was inquiring after them earlier this morning, and took a few for the compound."

"That's fine. I guess Roger was happy when you told him his processors had arrived, huh? Did you survive all the hollering and yelling?"

"Roger got those two days ago, Jonathan; they were delivered upstairs. I haven't talked to him for a lot longer than that, actually. I have seen him pass by in the hall on occasion, though – in fact, just a few minutes ago he waved as he went by."

Jonathan's yellow light came on instantly. *What business would he have down here if it weren't to pick up something? All his work is done in the first basement labs. And he's clearly lied to me about where he was just now.*

"I must have misunderstood him then. Thanks, Clark." Jonathan stepped out into the hall, hesitated, then turned right, away from the elevators. He pulled out his set of master keys and methodically opened every door on the corridor, examining the contents of each room

thoroughly. He was beginning to feel a bit silly, when halfway up the other side, he found a door that wouldn't open. He tried all his keys again, then went back to the tool room, grabbed a crowbar off the workbench and after a couple of attempts, popped the door open.

He stood there staring into the darkness for a moment, then hit the wall switch. He gasped and involuntarily stepped back into the hallway. He wasn't sure what a nuclear weapon would look like, other than photos of Fatman and Little Boy he had seen in magazines, but what he was looking at could certainly be one. It rested on two metal sawhorse-like supports, was roughly three meters long, cylindrical in shape, but had no outer shell. All the wires and structural components were visible, and there was a set of ten 12-volt car batteries in the corner as well as a heavy cable running to a wall outlet. A box with a telescoping antenna was mounted on the wall. Against the opposite wall was a small table with a keyboard, CRT and a computer. Jonathan recognized the model. It was one of over a hundred that had been ordered by Archaeogenetics, solely for use on the island. And next to the keyboard was a bright red pencil with its eraser chewed off; a signature calling card of Roger's hyperactive personality, and his favorite brand.

§

"Where's Roger, Richard?"

"Sava has him."

"But Richard, we can't..."

"Don't worry, Elaine. He promised to interrogate him thoroughly. Nothing else. Eli? Have you finished yet?"

Eli, crouched on the floor behind the device, poked her head up. Her golden eyes blazed for a moment, then turned blue. "Yes, Papa. I know all the sounds and smells now." She grabbed Oskar's hand and headed for the door.

"Remember what I told you. Stay in contact with Hannah and your mother at all times. If you find anything, let us know. Don't go looking for trouble. Promise."

"I promise, Papa." She dragged Oskar out the door and headed for the elevator. Elaine followed close behind them.

Dawson nodded to the technicians, who went to work disarming the bomb. Jonathan stood by taking notes and writing down any identifying marks on the individual components, hoping to trace them back to their origins.

"Any changes, Hannah?"

Once again, Hannah drifted into the future. "No...Yes! The island is less 'gone' than it was before! In fact, the lighthouse peninsula is still there, even though the lighthouse is gone! And even a bit of Phoenix Park Road is there!"

Dawson looked at Jack. “This bomb wouldn’t have made that much difference in the topography change. I believe it’s here as insurance; just to make sure this structure will be completely destroyed in the blast. There must be at least one other, larger one. Which we obviously find; probably tonight. Hannah! Don’t breathe a word of this to the others. We can’t risk changing anything. This future is too precious to interfere with in any way.”

“Okay, Mr. Dawson.” She closed her eyes just as the three of them in their black body suits took off over the Archaeogenetics building into the darkness. Elaine flew up the south side of the valley, Oskar and Eli the north side, flying low and slow over each home, circling it twice and moving on to the next. Oskar’s Geiger counter remained silent.

§

“So. What now?” Roger asked defiantly. He had endured over three hours of questioning and given them nothing, confident that the BbC would get him safely out of this mess. “The BbC knows I’m here. Sooner or later, they’ll be asking after me.”

Sava laughed. “So you’ve worked for them long enough to understand their methods and you still believe they care what happens to you now? You’ve failed in your job. And once they are aware of it, they’ll lose no time in distancing themselves from you completely if there’s any chance whatsoever that this incident would embarrass them in any way. No, you’re on your own now, Roger.”

“You won’t be offended if I don’t believe you, Sava? On the other hand, I actually don’t care whether I offend you or not.”

Sava looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, weighed his acts against his youth, stupidity, and astonishing lack of compassion, and knew what he had to do. Roger had given him no choice. He sighed, “Okay. You win. We’ll fly you to the mainland and turn you over to the so-called ‘proper authorities.’” He held the door for him.

“Is this some kind of a joke?”

“Not at all. I was instructed to interrogate you, and no matter the outcome, release you, unharmed, to the proper authorities. I’m a man of my word.” He hesitated a moment. “You might want to bring your jacket. The evenings can be quite cold this time of year.

Roger slipped into his jacket and stepped out in the hall. Sava shut the door behind him and led him down the sparkling-white terrazzo hallway and through the side door out onto the tarmac, where the plane was standing, dark and silent, still chocked and tethered. The runway lights were off and, as soon as the door shut behind them, the only light was that of the full moon.

“Where is everyone?”

“There’s just you and me, Roger. We’ll be making this trip alone.

He stepped back, methodically removed his jacket and shirt, folded them neatly, and placed them carefully on the tarmac. He knelt down, removed his shoes and socks, and placed them, side by side, next to his clothes.

Roger was beginning to think Sava had lost his mind. He slowly backed toward the door. *If I can just step back inside, I'll call for help. This guy is going off the deep end.*

Sava raised his arms swiftly, grew his wings, and before Roger could react, grabbed his wrist firmly. "Get the picture?" he bared his fangs.

"My God! You're...you're..."

"Yes I am. As an Angel so aptly put it, I'm 'The Real Thing.' Didn't your handlers warn you about me? Judging by the expression on your face, I would guess they didn't—an important omission on their part, don't you think? It could make one question their honesty and concern for their own employees' well-being."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Why, I'm going to fly you to the proper authorities, as I promised." He leaped into the air, grabbed Roger in his talons, and flew swiftly out over the harbor; the beginning of the long, cold journey to Manchester.

§

After the second unsuccessful flight up the valley, the three of them rested at Vista Point. "I'm sorry, Mama. I was really hoping it would be easy, now that we know what we're looking for."

"We're not done yet, Eli. We need to think like they would. Imagine you worked for them. Then, imagine yourself standing where we are now, knowing a bomb was already safely placed in the Archaeogenetics building. Your job is to figure out where to place another. The first will destroy all the records of the vaccine and Eli's history, and simultaneously, the people most intimately involved with the work. The next step is to destroy all the people peripherally connected to the work, and any of the primaries who happen to be at home at the time. So. Where would you place the device?"

Eli and Oskar looked at each other. Finally Eli sat down on the bench and put her face in her hands. "I don't know, Mama. Where it would kill the most people I guess."

"And where might that be? Oskar?"

"Didn't most of the bombs actually dropped, go off high in the air?"

"Yes they did, Oskar. They're more effective that way. But those were dropped from planes. And, as Jonathan has pointed out, even the BbC wouldn't be able to pull that off without leaving

at least a paper trail that would lead eventually back to them. Too many people would have to be involved.”

“I guess it would be best if it was as high up on this side of the valley as it could be, then.”

“Like here, Mama?” Eli walked around the benches, peered over the edge of the hill, and carefully examined the cliff behind them, but there was nothing.

“I think they would have put it in a building that was finished when there weren’t very many people here, and Jonathan hadn’t thought much about security.”

“Now that’s good, Oskar! I hadn’t thought of it that way before. The first buildings in the valley were the general store, for obvious reasons, then the school, just because Jonathan specifically wanted you children to feel like you had a future here. Then, a few homes just down the hill from us for the pioneers of the project, a group of which Roger was definitely not a member,” Elaine continued as she pointed them each out to them, “then the homes at the lower end of the valley. All after your first trip here.”

“The school, Mama. It’s just below us, it has a really nice computer lab, and...” She hated the thought that she might be right. *Why can’t they just leave us alone? Why do they all hate us so much?*

“Let’s go take a look.” Elaine glided off the lip of Vista Point into the valley and banked to the left, toward the school. Eli and Oskar followed closely behind.

§

“There’s nothing here, Mama.” Eli sat down at her desk, head in her hands.

“It appears so, Eli.” I was hoping the basement would give us something, so I followed Jonathan’s lead and tried all the doors, but my keys opened them all.”

“What do we do now, Mom? Should we search every house on foot?”

“No, Oskar. I haven’t given up on the school yet. It seems like such a perfect location, I still believe it’s here somewhere.” Her eyes lit up. “Come with me. I have an idea. Maybe we can approach this from the ‘power’ end of the equation.” She directed them back downstairs to the basement and into the electrical room. She opened the panel below the switchbox and examined the cables entering and leaving the box. “Look here! There’s a 220-volt cable, which doesn’t terminate in the box; rather it drops into this notch and disappears behind the box, and reappears here, at the top and quickly joins the others as they head into the structure through these conduits. Even a competent electrician might miss this.”

“I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about, Mama. How do you know all this stuff?”

“You forget how the vault was powered, Eli. I watched ‘The Other One’ very carefully when he tapped into the underground cable system so skillfully. I had a lot of time on my hands back then, you know.”

“But what does it mean?” Oskar scratched his head.

“It means that someone wanted to make sure this one circuit didn’t have a breaker on it. He needed uninterrupted power. For something. Now all we have to do is find that ‘something.’ Eli? Pace off the length of the basement corridor, then go upstairs and pace off the first floor corridor. It’s the only thing we haven’t done yet.”

Eli headed for the north end of the corridor and began counting her footsteps. Elaine and Oskar followed her to the end of the corridor and examined the wall. “Concrete, Oskar.” She pounded on it hard with her fist. “Yep! Quite solid.” Just to be sure, she tested the entire wall, then used her claws to peel away a bit of the sheetrock, and examined the stud connections between the concrete and the non-load-bearing walls of the hallway. Everything was as it should be. “Let’s look at the other end.”

By the time they reached the other end, Eli was back. “Mama, the corridor is four meters longer upstairs than downstairs!”

“I thought as much, Eli.” Elaine pounded on the south wall. “This one seems to be concrete too, Oskar.”

“But it sounds different, Mom.”

“You’re right, Oskar. It does.” She cocked her arm back and swung at the wall with all her strength. Her arm disappeared up to the elbow in the resulting gaping hole in the wall. She quickly grabbed the ragged edges, braced her feet at the foot of the wall and opened up an even bigger hole. By the time she was finished, the floor was littered with debris, and a much larger version of the device they had already seen in the third basement of the Archaeogenetics building was laid bare.

“Papa’s on his way, Mama. With Jonathan and the engineers. Papa says ‘Good work!’” Eli grinned at her.

Hannah? Your vision...

“The island looks different, Mrs. Dawson! But it looked that way as soon as you, Eli and Oskar started on your flight. Mr. Dawson didn’t want me to tell you because...”

I understand, Hannah. He didn’t want to risk changing anything. How does it look now, Hannah?

It doesn’t look as much like an atoll any more, Mrs. Dawson. The west side of the island is almost recognizable, but the same ship is still sitting in the middle of the big hole in the east side.

About a third of the valley is still there, but there's nothing left; no buildings or houses or anything. Just that darned old...ship!

"The ship, Eli! Why didn't we think of that before? What if they hid the biggest bomb on the ship that comes with the workers, or the one that brings food and supplies to the island?" Oskar grabbed her arm tightly. "Mom! I think..."

"You're right Oskar! We should have thought of that first! *Hannah! Tell Dr. Dawson and Jonathan right away!*

There were a few minutes of silence. Then...

Oskar! Hannah was beside herself with excitement. The island is back! Everything looks just like it does now! And your old house looks as good as new! And Mrs. Shaw's house! I have to go tell Jack! Hannah vanished.

"We're not going to hear from her for a while, Mama. Hannah is running over to tell Jack."

"Why doesn't she just call him or 'ESP' him? She doesn't need to..."

Eli just smiled.

§

"Why are you doing this to me? You haven't said anything to me for over an hour. Where are you taking me?" Roger was cold and his shoulders were numb. His fear of heights didn't make the situation any more tolerable, and his clothes were soaked. The heavy rain they had encountered over the Irish Sea had made an already difficult situation almost intolerable, and the lightning had terrified him.

"To the proper authorities. And in your case, the proper authorities are the folks you work for. I think they'll be quite surprised to see you on such short notice. And I don't expect them to be happy, considering the circumstances."

"You're...letting me go?"

"You've described my intentions perfectly."

"Because you're a 'man of your word?'"

"No. Because to show your gratitude, you're going to give me something in return."

Roger realized fully that he was in no position to bargain with him. "What do you want?"

"Who's the rogue?"

“The...what?”

“The man you work for. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. He’s just a voice on the phone.” He tried his best to keep from shivering, but it was hopeless. He knew if the flight continued much longer, he would freeze to death.

Sava dug his talons into Roger’s shoulders just a bit more. “Are you telling me that you were willing to slaughter hundreds of innocent men, women, and children on the word of a ‘voice on the phone?’ You insult my intelligence.”

“But it’s true.” Roger knew he was caught between a rock and a hard place. If he gave Sava Adrian’s name, he’d be in even more trouble than he was now. And if, as a result of keeping his mouth shut, Sava really did have to turn him in, he was certain the BbC would get him out, as long as he didn’t implicate anyone there. It was his only insurance. If Sava were to be believed.

“We don’t have much time left, Roger. We’re over Manchester now. So. What’s it going to be? The BbC or Scotland Yard?”

Roger took a breath. “You’re going to have to decide for yourself whether or not to believe me. I’ve told you the truth.”

Sava rolled his eyes. “What did they offer you, Roger? Food for the soul? Only one of a very few reasons why an otherwise normal man could bring himself to kill so many innocents. You’re clearly not religious, so you don’t have a cause you’re willing to give your life for. And you’re not really a Builderbriar, deluded by your highly successful financial endeavors into believing you are an expert at everything; you’re too self-absorbed, short-sighted, and stupid.” He shook his head in disgust. “You’re nothing but the hired help.” He banked sharply to the left and gained altitude rapidly. The lights below them tilted crazily and the cold wind whistled past Roger’s ears, which were already long past feeling anything.

He suddenly recognized the BbC complex ahead of him, and a deep sense of foreboding came over him. He had given Sava nothing. So why...

It suddenly hit him. How could this ...creature convince the authorities that he had done anything wrong? This whole flight had clearly been a spur-of-the-moment decision. Sava was carrying nothing with him that could possibly incriminate him. And Roger doubted that he was known to the authorities; at least not in any positive way. How could Sava even begin to convince them that he should be held for any reason at all? He had been bluffing this entire time.

§

Adrian was dumbfounded. “They found them both? In a matter of hours? How is it possible? How would they have even known to look for them at all? We left no clues at the third site.”

“Not only that, but we’ve just heard that, until further notice, all scheduled trips to the island by sea have been postponed. Even the ship that brings food and other essentials. Until further notice, only Archaeogenetics owned and operated vessels will be allowed anywhere near the island. No more subcontractors.” He paused. “And, after that first frantic call, we haven’t heard a word from Roger.”

“That’s to be expected of course. They have him. Have you contacted our lawyers?”

“They’re making inquiries now.”

Adrian was furious. “It sounds almost as though they’ve discovered our entire plan. Impossible!”

“It is, isn’t it? But you do realize it means all bets are off. The leadership is going to shut this down immediately.”

“But not before I...” He left the thought unfinished. He grabbed his cellphone and headed out the door. He needed to pay a visit to Dr. Franklin before they shut him down too.

He pulled out his keys and headed across the parking lot, one thought only on his mind. He had to get the sample before they ordered it destroyed. There was but one option left open to him now, and he knew they would never allow it. No matter. They wouldn’t know until it was over. *Better by far to apologize later, than to ask permission beforehand...*

The force of the impact threw him backwards onto the hard asphalt, and was accompanied by the sound of shattering glass and rending metal. He was instantly immersed in a fine mist of blood, sparkling in the ochre glow of the street lamps.

He leaped to his feet and rushed up to his Ferrari, which had been reduced to rubble and was covered with streaks of blood, bits of flesh, and chunks of brain tissue. He immediately recognized Roger’s leather flight jacket, still wrapped around what was left of his body, to the left and behind the car where it had finally come to rest.

He searched the night sky in vain, looking for Sava, positive that this was his work, and probably impromptu. He was the only one in their organization with the balls to do something this bold, brazen and cold-blooded.

He was more determined than ever to get even. This was personal now, even though it was unadmittedly so ever since Oskar and Dr. Dawson were stolen from him. He pulled out his handkerchief, wiped the blood off his face, and headed back to his office.

Chapter 46: A Death in the Family

Eli opened her eyes suddenly. Something had awakened her, but...

The knock on the door was repeated, then it opened slowly. "Eli? Are you awake?"

"Yes, Mama. Is something wrong?"

Hannah rolled over, stretched, and sat up.

"Nothing, other than it's almost time for breakfast." She quietly closed the door behind her, then opened it again for a moment. "When Oskar wakes up, tell him I need to talk to him alone."

Hannah lay back on Eli's pillow. *I wonder what that's about? She sounded really serious.* She resisted the urge to read her. *If she wanted us to know, she would have told us,* she admonished herself.

"Oskar? Did you hear that?" Eli shook him awake. "Mama wants to talk to you. Alone."

"Yeah, Oskar. What did you do?"

"I don't know, Hannah. I've been a very good boy for a couple of days now." He grinned at her.

"I think you're in trouble, Oskar. Remember, you stole the pizza for us last night after Mama went to bed."

"What I didn't tell you was that Mom was downstairs when I got there. I just asked her for it."

Hannah frowned. "You lied to us?"

"Not directly, Hannah. It was just a 'lie of omission.'"

She glared at him. "That takes all the fun out of it, Oskar."

"That's precisely why I didn't tell you."

"So. If it wasn't that, it has to be something else. You're always doing something you shouldn't." Eli wagged her finger at him.

"Well, what then?" he asked defiantly.

"She's downstairs waiting for you, Oskar. Just ask her." Eli tickled him, and ducked as he swung at her. Hannah, not one to miss an opportunity like this, pinned his arms over his head, while Eli attacked him again.

“Uncle!” Oskar lay there motionless, teeth gritted, and muscles tight until Eli, no longer feeling challenged, stopped tickling him.

“What’s wrong, Oskar? It’s not like you to give up so easily.” Hannah was suspicious.

“I just didn’t want to run the risk of hurting you both. I could live with hurting one of you but both...”

He didn’t get the chance to finish the sentence. They attacked him mercilessly. He put up a good fight, but finally, out of breath, he leaped out of bed and retreated across the hall, slamming his door in their rapidly-approaching faces.

“Coward!”

“Wimp!”

“Sticks and stones!” Oskar cried out from behind his locked door.

All through breakfast, Oskar kept an eye on Elaine, trying to glean some sort of clue from her manner, body language or expression, but drew a complete blank. When she wanted to be, she was completely unreadable, and he wasn’t about to try to ‘read’ her anyway. It was one of their unwritten but inviolable household rules.

Finally breakfast was over. Elaine stood, motioned for Oskar to follow her, and retreated into the living room. She sat down in the easy chair, and nodded toward the couch.

“I have something unpleasant to tell you, Oskar. And in spite of the fact that I know you keep no secrets from Eli, I thought it best to tell you alone. Are you okay with that?”

“I...guess so, Mom, if you think it’s best.” Oskar was worried now.

“Your mother is very ill, Oskar. She doesn’t have much time left.”

My mother? “But...you’re my mother...” *My Mother!* Oskar felt a lump in his throat, followed by a wave of guilt. “My...real...my first mother, you mean.”

“Yes, Oskar.” Elaine watched him carefully. “She’s in the hospital in Blackberg. Thanks to you, she’s been able to live comfortably all these years, but the consequences of her smoking finally caught up with her. She has lung cancer and isn’t expected to live much longer.”

“But...what am I supposed to...what can I...what should I do, Mom?” Tears welled up in his eyes, suddenly and unexpectedly. His mother was dying. And he hadn’t seen her or spoken to her in over 15 years. What could he possibly do about it now? It was way too late. He had always been meaning to do...something, but could never seem to find the time to think it through. Now it was too late.

“What would you like to do, Oskar?” Elaine sat down beside him and put her arm around him.

“I don’t know, Mom. I can’t go see her! She’d hate me! But I can’t just let her die, not knowing that...not knowing that I’m alive and happy.” *And that I’m happy because I left her without even looking back or sending her so much as a single letter letting her know I’m alive and safe.*

“She’d hate me, Mom. I can’t do anything or she’ll hate me!”

“Oskar, the fact that you care so much what she thinks, is all the more reason you need to do something.”

“I need to talk to Eli, Mom. Can I talk to Eli?”

“Of course, Oskar. Let me know what you decide.” She hesitated. “I don’t usually tell you what I think before you’ve made up your mind, but I...think you should talk to her, Oskar.”

“But, what could I possibly say that would make everything right?” The tears welled up again.

“I have confidence in you, Oskar. Between the two of you, I know you’ll figure it out.” Elaine stepped out in the hall and nodded to Eli, who immediately rushed past her.

“I’m so sorry, Oskar. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Eli. What do you think I should do?”

“She’s not my mother, Oskar. But I know you had your problems with her, and you felt she didn’t care enough about you to try to understand the problems you were having...”

“Exactly right, Eli.”

“But then, why have you been using your money to support her all these years? If you really didn’t care, why would you do that?”

“I felt bad because she thought I was dead, and I wasn’t; and I never let her know.”

“Then why is it important that she know now?”

“Because...because she’ll die believing something that isn’t true.”

“People do that all the time, Oskar. Look at all the people who died believing in all the Greek Gods. And people who died believing the world was flat. And that all the stars, planets, and the Sun all revolved around the Earth. And all those people even today that believe that when they die, they’ll go to heaven.”

Oskar ever so gently put his hand over her mouth. “I don’t think I want to talk about that right now, Eli. Okay?”

“I’m sorry, Oskar,” she whispered. *What a dope I am sometimes!*

You’re not a dope, Eli. I’ve always known how you feel about God. I just don’t think I’m there yet.”

“There’s absolutely no hurry, Oskar. Take your time.” She grinned at him. *Do you forgive me?*

He smiled at her and kissed her on the cheek.

“Mom?!”

“Yes, Oskar?” Elaine put down her tea, came back into the living room and sat down next to Eli.

“I think I ... want to do it. Would you, Dad, and Eli come with me? Just until...”

Of course, Oskar. I wouldn’t think of making you do this on your own.”

“Can I come in?” Hannah peaked around the corner.

“I guess it’s hard to keep secrets around here. You can come in, Hannah.”

“You simply have to do this, Oskar! I think it’s absolutely the right thing to do!”

“Come on now, Hannah. Don’t beat around the bush. Tell me what you really think!”

“Ha, Ha. I suppose you think that’s funny.”

“I do, Hannah. But since you’re always right on the important things, I guess I’ll have to take your advice.”

“When, Oskar?”

“Right now, Hannah. You’re right. I’m going to do it.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I mean when are you going to see her?”

“I don’t know!” He felt a hard lump in the pit of his stomach. “Mom? I don’t know...”

“I know, Oskar. It’s a hard thing to hear so unexpectedly. But I think we should do it...soon. Probably within the next few days.”

“Okay, Mom.” He put his arm around Eli.

“Oskar? Is there anything I can...”

“No, Hannah. Thanks, though. And thanks for being so sure. Believe it or not, it helps.”

“I know, Oskar.” She stole a glance at Eli and smiled to herself. *Boy, is she in for a surprise. One bright spot in the midst of something so terribly sad.*

§

The trip to Blackeberg was long...too long. Oskar had way too much time trying to come up with something to say to his mother that would make a difference; and he had come up with nothing. By the time they landed he was no closer to a solution than when they began and he was even less sure that he was doing the right thing.

Archaeogenetics had a car waiting for them at the Bromma airport, and in a few minutes, they had crossed Highway 275 onto Blackebergsvägen. Blackeberg hadn't changed; everything was as it had been when they had fled their past that night so long ago, almost as though frozen in time. They crossed the tracks, turned right on Holbergsgaten, passed the Centrum, and pulled into the Hospital parking lot.

Eli glanced up uneasily at the 7th floor window over the hospital entrance, where she had seen Håkan alive for the last time, and had made just one more of the many stupid mistakes that had later come back to haunt her. She shuddered and squeezed Oskar's hand.

She held her breath and hesitated instinctively as they passed through the front doors, uninvited, then smiled grimly to herself. So much had changed since that dark night so long ago, yet here they were, drawn back once again by events beyond their control.

After Richard made inquiries at the front desk, they all stepped quietly into the elevator. “Does she have any friends, Mom?”

Elaine pressed the button for the seventh floor. “No, Oskar. She doesn't, at least not any longer. Her best friend died some years ago. Your dad came back for a short time about 10 years ago, but she sent him away, because he hadn't changed. He never managed to get a handle on his alcohol problem.”

“Then, who's taking care of her? Who cares about her?”

“The doctors are doing everything they can to keep her comfortable Oskar.” Elaine didn't know what else she could say.

“You care about her, don't you?” Eli whispered.

“I don't know, Eli. I really don't know. I don't know if she took care of me because she loved me, or because she had to.”

“Does it matter why, Oskar? All that matters is that she took care of you. Back when you were a sweet little boy. She was lucky. I wish I had been there back then to take care of you.” She grinned at him.

“You were there when I needed you the most, Eli.”

“And you think she wasn’t, don’t you Oskar.” Elaine squeezed his shoulder.

“I don’t know, Mom! I don’t know!”

“Maybe you should ask her, then.”

“I couldn’t! She’s dying!”

“All the more reason, Oskar. Perhaps you have as much a right to the truth as you’re willing to grant her.”

Papa stepped out of the elevator and talked quietly to the nurse at the desk. She nodded and pointed down the hall. “Room 708, second from the end on the left.”

Seventh floor, Eli thought to herself. A flood of memories rushed back to her; more vivid memories of her last meeting with Håkan--at least as a man--in this very place, *He was right there!* She shuddered as she passed his room, still recognizable after all these years. She remembered vividly the feelings she had, sitting out on the snow-covered window ledge, when he offered his neck to her and she realized for the first time that she had cared for him in spite of his ... wants. She was profoundly grateful he had never tried to force himself on her in spite of them, and somehow she knew it wasn’t really because he was afraid of her. It was something else; perhaps a kind of respect for her feelings, or perhaps even a bit of the real love he was still capable of. But she didn’t delude herself; she knew he would have done all of it if she had allowed it. Even so, after all these years with Oskar, she was even more sure that Håkan had loved her in his own way. He had, after all, given her his blood that she might live. In the end, wasn’t that unselfish love?

“We’ll wait here, Oskar.” Elaine motioned Rich and Eli into the small waiting room at the end of the hall and started for his mother’s room, but Eli stepped in front of her and took his hand.

“I’ll do it, Mama. Please?” Elaine smiled at her and nodded.

The nurse stood up when Oskar hesitated at the door. “She’s drifted off for the moment, but should wake up any time. Why don’t you sit here next to the bed?” She smiled at him. “So you’re her grandson? I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you. If you need anything, just buzz.”

Oskar sat down carefully on the edge of the chair. His mother was a ghost of her former self. The disease had certainly taken its toll, but it was his mother, no doubt. Again, the tears welled up in his eyes as the reality of the situation finally sank in.

His mother was dying. But his mother could never die. It was impossible. Your parents never died; they had no beginning and no end. They never changed. You just got bigger, and they got smaller, until they were finally just people you loved, no more; no less. It wasn’t supposed to

happen like...this. He himself had no beginning, until Eli. And with luck, no end for a very long time. And he could grow old, or he could stay young. It was his choice. He suddenly wished he could have given her the same choice, back when it would have mattered. Now it was too late.

He cried.

Suddenly, there was a slight movement, and he felt her hand on his. "Where's your mother?" she whispered. "Are you going to be all right?"

He looked up at her.

Her eyes got big. "You look just like...my son. But of course, that can't be. My son died long ago. Because I failed him." She stared up at the ceiling a moment, winced in pain, then let go of his hand. "I'm sorry. Do I know you? Are you in the right room?"

He nodded. "I'm...my name is Oskar. And I came to see you. Because you're my mother. And you're dying."

She stared at him a moment, then smiled. "I must be dreaming. Because it's so easy for me to believe you." She strained to sit up, but couldn't. "Would you please raise the bed for me a bit?" Oskar looked for the button, found it, hesitated, then pressed it carefully. "That's it...just a bit more...Thank you...Oskar."

"You're welcome." He found he couldn't take his eyes off her. She sounded the same. And all the memories came flooding back, and none of his memories of her were really bad. If he had just told her about the trouble he was having back then, would she have done anything about it? He hadn't thought so at the time, but he was only 12. What did he know? Now, he was filled with doubt, and his mind was crowded with all the 'what ifs' he had long forgotten that had plagued him from the beginning of the dark years.

"I thought you were dead, Oskar. When the police came and told me what happened at the pool, I was sure you were dead. And when we heard nothing for over a year, I thought..." She took his hand in hers, turned it over and examined it carefully, then smiled at him. "You still have the scar on your finger where Bobby bit you. I remember how upset you were, but he was just a puppy, Oskar. He didn't know any better."

"I know, Mom. You told me."

"Where have you been, Oskar? When they found you in Karlstad, your father and I came as quickly as we could, but you were gone, and the police told us you had been taken again by the same awful people who killed those poor boys."

He saw the tears in her eyes. "I had so much that I wanted to promise you then, and I never got the chance. And the years went by, and I heard nothing. And finally, I...gave up." She reached up and put her hand on his cheek. "I'm sorry, Oskar. I should never have given up. Can you ever forgive me?"

“Mom, I...” he took a deep breath. “I came because I wanted you to know the truth. That I’m happy and I have a good life. And all this time, I’ve been with people who love me.”

She smiled at him. “I’m happy for you then, Oskar.”

“Aren’t you upset with me? For not calling? For not writing?”

She sighed, “I love you Oskar. But it took the prospect of your death to make me realize it. You don’t owe me anything.”

“But Mom, I’m not...”

“Dead? Of course you are. You’ll always be alive in my memories, Oskar, but it’s been 15 years, and you’re still 12. It’s impossible.”

“14, Mom. I’m 14 now. Can’t you tell? I’m taller, and stronger, and ...”

“Who’s there?!”

Startled, Eli quickly stepped farther back in the shadows.

“I...I know you. You are ...were Oskar’s little friend.” With a great deal of effort, Yvonne raised her head and peered into the hallway.

“Her name is Eli, Mom.”

“I know her name, Oskar. Even though you never saw fit to introduce her to me. And I waited too long for you to do it, and then you were gone.”

“How did you...”

“I’m your mother, Oskar. And I worried about you. Did you really think I wouldn’t peek when you went outside at night?”

“I thought you didn’t...”

“Care, Oskar? You thought I didn’t care?”

“Yes. I thought you didn’t care. Enough.”

“You were my responsibility, Oskar. I had to make sure you were safe.”

“It’s not the same thing, Mom.”

“No. It’s not, Oskar. You’re right.” She waved her hand. “Don’t just stand out there. Come in, Eli.”

Eli hesitated a moment, then came up beside Oskar and took his hand in hers.

Yvonne smiled at her. “‘I must be gone and live, or stay and die. Yours, Eli.’ You can’t imagine what went through my head when I saw your note that morning before Oskar got up, and realized I really had heard talking from his room the night before.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I liked you almost immediately. It’s not often these days you find a 12-year-old who can quote Shakespeare—or wants to.”

“I’m fourteen, Mrs. Eriksson; or at least I will be in November.”

“So. You’re still friends after almost two years? I think that’s nice.”

“15 years, Mom. We’ve been best friends for 15 years.”

She sighed, “My dreams have always been a bit disjointed, but I don’t usually notice until after I wake up.” She began coughing violently. Eli took her face in her hands, pressed her forehead to hers, and closed her eyes. Yvonne felt every muscle in her body relax. The coughing stopped immediately.

She smiled at Eli, grateful for the reprieve. “How sweet you are. I never imagined you would be so sweet...”

“You’re not dreaming, Mom. I’m real. Eli is real.” He took both her hands in his. “I’ll show you...”

And Oskar eased her ever so gently into his mind, and very carefully showed her all the beautiful and love-filled parts of their last 15 years and how they had built a family together.

§

Yvonne lay still on the bed, eyes closed, but she still clung tightly to Oskar’s hand. Finally, Richard and Elaine stood beside him.

“Is she okay, Oskar?” Eli whispered.

“I’m fine, Eli. I’m just...resting.” She looked carefully at Elaine, then at Richard. “You know if I had known, I would have fought to get him back, don’t you?” Her voice was suddenly hard.

“Yes. I’m sure you would have.” Elaine met her gaze defiantly. “But you would never...” she stopped suddenly. What was the point?

“But I would have been wrong,” Yvonne whispered. “I...I thank you for seeing something in my son that I couldn’t see until it was too late. I suppose it’s no excuse to say I was young--and alone-- and could just barely make ends meet. And I had a child to take care of, and a husband who drank like a fish, and had no problem with doing it in front of Oskar!” her voice shook with anger. “Things would be different if I knew then what I know now.” She squeezed Oskar’s hand. “But then, would you have still needed Eli? Would you have...still left me for her?”

“Nothing would have been any different, Mom. I’m sorry. And it wasn’t your fault.” He was determined not to hurt her any more than he already had. “I loved her almost from the beginning. And because of what she was, it was the only way. And how could you have stopped the bullying? I wasn’t the only one, you know. And the others had mothers too—and fathers, for all the good it did them.”

She smiled at him, and closed her eyes. “I love you Oskar. If you never believe anything else about me, you have to believe that.”

“I do, Mom. And I love you too.” And he did.

And he cried; he cried for all the years he had done nothing to reach out to her, and for the price he had paid for it. And for the gift of her unrequited love, which had gone so long unclaimed because he had been so quick to judge.

But I was only twelve years old! An excuse, he knew, he simply could not hide behind anymore because of the enormity of the consequences. *All those lost years!* Years he knew were all the more precious because his mother was mortal, and had so few to waste. And now she had none left.

She slowly loosened her grip on his hand, but he refused to let her go. He felt her drift off into an uneasy sleep. Her breathing became faster; more labored.

§

“Oskar? Would you like to take a break? I’ll stay with her.” Elaine was worried about him. He had been sitting there now for over six hours, refusing to let go of her hand.

“No, Mom. What if she...while I’m in the bathroom or something?”

“Let me, Oskar.” Eli gently took her other hand. “You have to get something to eat. And use the bathroom.” She grinned at him. “I’ll...know in plenty of time when you have to come back. And you’ll know when I know.” Oskar looked into her beautiful blue eyes and read her thoughts; thoughts that were dark and foreign; thoughts that revealed the truth in what she had said. He remembered the thousands of deaths she had caused, and she showed him how close she had been to so many of them, and how she had learned to anticipate that instant at which the final threshold between life and death was breached. He let go of his mother’s hand. Eli smiled.

Papa put his arm around Oskar's shoulder and pulled him gently away from the bed. "We had no choice, Oskar. You know that don't you?" They went into the waiting room and stepped out on the balcony, where the whole town of Blackeberg lay before them and the lights of Stockholm lit up the night sky to the east. "Too much was at stake. Your future together, as well as Eli's future and safety were so important..."

"And yours, Dad." Oskar put his arm around his waist. "You would have been put in jail for kidnapping, and maybe tried for Detective Ellstrom's murder someday. I doubt that my mother would have been quite so understanding back then. I know that. But still..."

"Don't sell her short, Oskar. Perhaps she would have understood, even then."

"But we couldn't take the risk." Oskar put his arms around him. "Thanks, Dad. You always seem to know just what to say." He smiled. "...think I'm going to take a little walk; maybe get something to eat downstairs. Want to come?"

"Of course, Oskar."

§

Oskar? I think you should come back now.

We're on our way, Eli. Oskar felt a lump in his throat.

"We're not too late, are we?"

"No, Dad. I trust Eli." But still, he paced back and forth in front of the elevator door. *Hurry, hurry.*

They rushed into the room, and Oskar grabbed his mother's hand tightly. *Mom?*

Oskar? Then it wasn't all just a dream.

No, Mom. Everything's real. Just open your eyes and you'll see that we're all here.

Her eyelids fluttered, then her eyes slowly opened. She sighed softly, and closed them again.

Thank you for coming, Oskar. You don't know how much it means to me.

I came because I wanted you to know the truth. He paused, *and because I didn't want you to...go to sleep alone.*

Once again, the tears came. He remembered vividly when the Other One died; how beautiful his soul had looked before it shattered, in spite of what he was. He wasn't sure he could bear seeing that happen again, especially to his mother.

Eli watched, fascinated, as her chest slowly rose and fell, rose and fell, and her life slowly played itself out, until ...

Oskar felt her quietly slip away from him, and suddenly, there it was, in all its breathtaking beauty. He held his breath, terrified, and watched as its colors grew brighter and brighter; then with a sudden flash, it was gone. He frantically reached out into the space where she had been, but there was nothing; no sound, no light, no darkness. Just indifferent emptiness.

“Is that all there is?!” he cried out, sobbing. Why was there no thunder? No lightning? Something beautiful had simply vanished without a sound, and the world went on as though nothing of any import had happened.

Eli put her arms around him, still reeling from what she had just seen. And she wondered why, in all those dark years, she had never seen it before. “I...don’t know Oskar. It was so beautiful that it couldn’t have all gone to nothing. Could it?”

They held each other tightly. “I love you so,” he whispered.

Chapter 47: Metamorphosis

“There he is again, Ryan. What do you think we should do?”

“Probably just follow Sava’s advice and ignore him, Janice. He told us not to do anything to attract their attention or get them angry, especially after what happened last week. He said they would all be jumpy after whatever it was he did.”

“What do you suppose he did, Ryan?”

“I don’t know, and I’m not sure I want to know.” He grinned at her. “Whatever it was, it seems to have upped their surveillance of us. It’s actually beginning to worry me, because in the last couple of days, they’ve become obvious. They don’t seem to care if we spot them.” Impulsively, he waved at their stalker, who pretended not to notice.

“Ryan!” she grabbed his arm. “Don’t!”

“I can’t help it! Who does he think he is, anyway?”

“Remember what happened last time you confronted one of them. Don’t be stupid!” she admonished him.

“It’s noon, and there are people all around us. What’s he going to do?”

“Well, in eight hours, it’ll be dark and we’ll be alone.”

“Really? What did you have in mind?”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I meant. You’ll be home and I’ll be working at the bookstore. Alone.”

He took her hand. “I’m coming over to the store tonight, and I’ll not take ‘no’ for an answer. This guy has really crossed the line, and I am genuinely worried. And, no, I’m no hero. I’m sure he’s armed, and I’m certainly no match for him. But if we’re both there, he’s not as likely to do anything. It wouldn’t be worth the risk.” *I hope*, he thought to himself.

She breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn’t wanted to ask him but... “Thanks, Ryan. And while you’re there, you can help me restock the shelves. Mr. Keppler won’t mind I’m sure. And I’ll pack a supper for us.”

“How could I resist an offer like that?” The bus pulled up, and the doors opened with a loud hiss. He followed Janice up the steps and waved at their stalker one last time as the doors closed behind them.

§

Again he stared at the syringe, closely examining the pale yellow-brown liquid in the barrel. Adrian had put this off now for almost a week, examining and reexamining the culture under a microscope, and verifying, at least in his own mind, what doctor Franklin had told him; that something distinctly alive permeated the sample; so densely, in fact, that it altered the viscosity of the liquid. Something that didn't die unless exposed to direct sunlight; microscopic elongated tadpole-like creatures that moved slowly and deliberately from one side of the containment vessel, no matter its size, to the other and back again, never altering their tempo, unless...a drop of human blood was introduced into the mixture. Anything else was ignored, but blood? He remembered vividly how, even to the unaided eye, the rippling on the surface of the petri dish was clearly visible, especially at the peak of the feeding frenzy. And how Dr. Franklin had shown him the mysterious clumping that occurred immediately afterwards, as the tiny creatures wound themselves around each other in complex patterns, building enormous, relatively speaking, structures of some sort. If no more blood were introduced, the structures eventually unraveled, and the creatures once again began their mindless journey. Franklin's photographs of the events clearly showed how similar these resulting structures were to brain cells, which, he knew, was the only reason he was reluctant to take that final step.

The thought that he would be sharing his mind and body with...another sentient life form held him back. He knew it wasn't fear, but rather the thought that his purpose and goals might be hijacked by other, perhaps even more single-minded ones; ones over which he would have less control.

"But that child could do it! And she did it for over 200 years. And Elaine? Nothing but a genetically weak-minded woman?" If they could do it, he certainly could. And with that thought foremost in his mind, he plunged the needle into his abdomen and pushed the plunger in up to its hilt.

I guess I've just crossed my own Rubicon, he thought to himself.

§

Sava waited patiently. He knew he had a storm to weather, but he was fatalistic about it. What was done was done. They would be indignant, they would berate him, scold him, and make him promise not to do it again, but ultimately, they would know he had done what he had to do.

Jonathan, Richard, Jack, and Elaine filed into the conference room quietly, and sat down.

"Sava, frankly I'm speechless," Richard began. "I thought we had reached an understanding about this sort of thing. How could you have done this? What were you thinking?!"

"You're right, Richard. I made a huge mistake."

"Apology a bit too little, and too late, don't you think?"

Sava stood up, placed his hands firmly on the table and leaned toward him. "The mistake I made was in missing my target. I was aiming for Adrian," he growled.

“As old as you are, I would have thought you would be more mature; less impulsive,” Jack shot back, angrily.

“As intelligent as you are, I would have thought you would have understood long before I, the ramifications of allowing him to live!” He glared at Elaine “I should never have listened to you. You must know by now that none of this – I repeat, ‘none of this’ – would have happened if I had dispatched him that night we rescued Richard and Oskar. Your simplistic sense of humanity is the sole cause of the near-destruction of everything we’ve worked for.”

Elaine turned red with anger. “The bomb in the school was placed long before we rescued them, Sava. This was part of a long-range plan; one I am sure involves more people than just Adrian. I repeat: He’s replaceable!”

“Then why is there no longer a threat? The BbC, once committed to a cause, doesn’t give up that easily. They were willing to risk World War 2 rather than give up an earlier cause. Why would they quit now unless Adrian was a rogue, without the support of the majority?”

Richard rushed to her defense. “Because the sophistication and cost of the project precludes it from being the work of a small number of people. Do you think state-of-the-art nuclear weapons such as these grow on trees?”

“They’re much more available than you seem to think, Doctor, but that’s another story. I did what I felt I needed to do, despite your misgivings. Now, you have to decide what you’re going to do about it!” As soon as he said it, he knew he had made an error. He had backed them into a corner; the last thing he had intended.

Jack jumped to his feet. “I’ve had quite enough of this! You’re a loose cannon. You made a promise to me, which you’ve repeatedly broken. I think it’s time we put an end to this!”

Sava could see the train wreck approaching, but he simply couldn’t and wouldn’t stop it. “Do what you have to do! But if you think that will stop me from continuing to protect Eli in any way that I feel is necessary, with or without your approval, you’ve got another think coming! I’ve been doing it now for over four of your lifetimes, and will continue doing it long after you’re dead!”

“Stop it!!” Eli stormed into the room. “Jack, you can’t do this! Sava is...he’s...all that’s left!”

“What do you mean, Eli,” Jack asked, softly.

“He’s all that’s left of Gudmund’s attempts to set things right. And I love him dearly, not only for everything he’s done for us, but why.” She put her arms around Sava – and he put his around her, gently and lovingly, and pressed his cheek against hers. And she could feel the purity of his unselfish dedication to her, and even though she couldn’t understand it, it made her feel warm and secure, and in a way, important somehow.

“I’ll never leave you, Eli. No matter what they do or say. I promise this to you! And because you love them, I’ll protect them too,” he whispered.

And Eli saw instantly both the truth and the lie in what he had said. And she smiled to herself.

“Papa, please! Jack...Mama, he’s part of our family!”

Jack knew in his heart that she was right, but something had to be done. Like Eli, Sava had murdered thousands throughout his life. But, unlike with Eli, the now unnecessary killings continued. He was convinced there was no solution to the problem. “Dr. Dawson, I’m disqualifying myself from having any part in this decision. I don’t feel I can be objective any longer. After what he did to Hannah, and now, this? I’m done.”

“Papa?”

“I can’t remove you from this family, Sava. No matter what you’ve done, I simply can’t do it. I don’t go back on my promises. For better or for worse, we’re going to have to live with you. But you can at least have enough respect for us to tell us in advance the next time you decide to murder someone. Is that too much to ask?” *Looks like Sava has maneuvered himself back to our original agreement then*, he thought to himself. He sighed. As hard as he tried, he had always been a terrible negotiator.

“No, Doctor, it is not. And I apologize for not having done so this time. However, just so you know: I actually saved Roger from the very unpleasant experience he was almost certain to have undergone once the BbC got him back. And rest assured, they would have gotten him back. I only did their job for them, but a bit more mercifully, if I do say so myself.

“Thank you, Papa” Eli threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. And she showed him Sava’s dedication, as well as his lie. Papa smiled and shook his head. Sava was no longer quite the enigma he had always thought he was.

§

“I am getting sick and tired of this,” Ryan hissed. “He’s not only following us, he’s rubbing our noses in it.” He watched the jerk put his feet up on the table in the reading area, flip open the book and pretend to be reading.

“I know, but there’s nothing we can do about it. I have to treat him as I would any other customer.” But the spell was broken, she realized. She had always felt safe here ever since Sava has come to see her shortly after she got the job. Just his presence in the store that one time had done it. And now, in an instant, it was undone.

“Miss? Do you have ‘Jubal Sackett?’ I’ve already read ‘Hondo.’”

“You’re lucky we have that one, sir. We don’t get many requests for Louis L’Amour in Sunderland.”

He looked up at her and frowned. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, sir. I’m just telling you that ‘Hondo’ is the only Louis L’Amour we have in stock at present. I’d be happy to order—‘Jubal Sackett’ is it?—for you if you wish.” She thumbed through the catalog on the counter.

“Nah! Forget it. I’ll just find a better-stocked bookstore. I’m sure it won’t be hard.” He slid his feet off the table, stood up and stretched, and slowly made his way to the front door, casually flipping open magazines on the rack as he went. Ryan started toward him.

“Don’t, Ryan!” she whispered.

“I won’t, Janice. I promised.” He followed him to the door, watched him cross the street, and deliberately sit down at a table in front of the small café. “He’s just sitting there, watching us! I can’t believe this!”

“I think we should talk to Sava, Ryan. I’m getting scared.”

He was so angry now, he couldn’t see straight. Who did this guy think he was, scaring her like that? “Dammit! I’m going to talk to him. I’m telling you, he won’t try anything in public.” Ryan stormed across the street and sat down at his table.

“What do you think you’re doing?! You’ve scared Janice to death! If you don’t leave us alone, I’m going to the police.”

The man put down his beer and smiled at him, “I’ve done nothing wrong. You can’t prove anything. Have I hurt either of you? Threatened you? Harassed you?”

“You’re harassing us now! And we’re not going to put up with it anymore!”

“I think you need to calm down.” He said loudly. “Take a deep breath and relax. I have no idea who you are and what you want with me.”

Ryan noticed that they were attracting the attention of others now. He also realized how this must look to them.

“Is this kid harassing you, Dave?” A beefy man with an apron stepped up behind Ryan.

“He’s just a bit upset about something, Ted. I think he’s mistaken me for someone else. I really don’t want to cause you any trouble.” He stood up and grasped Ryan’s arm firmly. “Now, why don’t you just...go away and leave me alone, and I’ll forget the whole thing. Otherwise...” He nodded at the surveillance camera under the awning.

Ryan was livid, but he realized ‘Dave’ had perfectly manipulated the situation to his advantage. And now, he looked like the aggressor. When he spotted Janice across the street and saw the look on her face, his ego deflated instantly...but not completely.

“I’m sorry. I thought you were a different jerk. My mistake.” He retreated across the street and walked past Janice into the bookstore, avoiding her eyes. He had been stupid and he knew it.

He heard the door open and close behind him. “I’m sorry. I’ve just made things worse.” He didn’t want to give her an opportunity to say, ‘I told you so.’ He felt bad enough already.

“It’s okay, Ryan. I know you meant well, but it just underscores the problem. We need to talk to Sava.”

They both turned as the door opened behind them. “I’ve decided I’d like to buy ‘Hondo’ after all. You don’t have it in paperback do you?”

“N...No, we don’t,” Janice stammered.

“Well, hardcover will have to do, then.” He smiled at her and took out his wallet.

Ryan could see her hand shaking as she pulled the book back off the shelf. It was more than he could take. “Get the hell out of here! You’re scaring her now!”

‘Dave’ smiled at him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just came to buy a book from this nice-looking young lady here.” He leered at her.

Ryan moved quickly around the counter and headed for him. Dave moved back quickly, and slipped his hand in his jacket pocket.

Suddenly, the door opened behind him. Sava put one arm around Dave’s neck and with the other, grabbed his wrist and squeezed. “Take it out of your pocket slowly or I’ll break your arm,” he hissed.

Dave carefully removed the small tape recorder from his pocket, winced, and handed it to Sava.

“Sava! What are you doing here? I thought you went back...”

“I did, Ryan. But I’m here now, and it looks like I got here just in time.” He crushed the recorder in his hand and stuffed it back in Dave’s pocket. He spun him around, effortlessly lifted him completely off the ground and slammed him down on the counter.

“You go back and tell Adrian to leave these kids alone, or I’ll finish what I started. And next time, I won’t miss.” He loosened his grip on him, and without a word, Dave slid off the counter, stumbled to his feet and beat a hasty retreat.

“How long do you think it would take you both to pack and say your goodbyes to your parents?”

“Do you think we’re in danger, Sava?” Janice steadied herself on the edge of the counter.

“You’re both in danger of being arrested on trumped-up charges of one sort or another. He’s been trying to get Ryan to cross the line since noon so he could have him arrested for assault or harassment. And he thinks he has all the time in the world.”

He opened his briefcase and handed them each a large envelope. “Your job descriptions are inside, including an advance on your first paychecks, and relocation expenses. There is also a map of the island and its location with respect to the mainland. There is no longer any reason to keep it a secret; at least from you or your parents. And as soon as your parents agree, call me. And definitely call me if they don’t. The sooner the better.” He paused. “And please! Resist any temptation to engage any of these fellows in conversation before we leave. I assure you, it won’t end well for you.”

Ryan held his breath, pulled out the map and looked at it carefully. And there it was; a close-up aerial view of Phoenix Island. He grinned at Janice. *At last!* He was really looking forward to working with them all – so much so that he forgot to ask Sava exactly what his job would be.

§

Adrian’s eyes snapped open. He heard the steady 50-Hertz hum of the building’s electrical system—particularly strong in the direction of the overhead incandescent light—the murmur of voices, the rustling sound of his own clothing as he breathed, and the buzz of a fly.

He idly watched the fly’s erratic, aimless flight around the room and without even giving it a thought, deftly snatched it out of the air as it passed by.

“Adrian?” The hollow, disembodied voice was deafening.

“What is it, doctor?” He suddenly realized how hungry he was. He lurched to his feet, stumbled over to the small refrigerator, and jerked the handle. It came off in his hand. Frustrated, he threw it against the wall and, carefully this time, eased the door open.

He pulled out a bag of blood. “This does NOT look good to me, doctor. Shouldn’t it?”

“Not necessarily. You have a lifetime of food prejudice built up. The only way you’ll know is with the taste test.”

Without hesitation, he popped the seal, stuck the tube in his mouth, and sucked hard.

As soon as it touch his lips and he smelled the ambrosia, he felt his identity slough away like burnt skin and disappear in a wave of animal lust, primordial passion, and dark ecstasy. He frantically grabbed for another bag with his free hand, overcompensated and knocked the refrigerator over, spilling its contents across the floor. He managed to grab another bag as it went over but it literally exploded in his clawed hand. He tossed the empty bag aside, lunged for

another and stuffed it, whole, into his mouth, tilted his head back and bit down firmly. This time he was able to suck down a quarter of the bag before it exploded like the first.

Trembling with anger and frustration, he stopped for a moment, then on his hands and knees, moved slowly and deliberately across the bloody floor and reached for an intact bag. He took a deep, measured breath, broke the seal, and put the tube in his mouth. It took everything he had to keep from crushing it in his claws. He reached for another, tore off the seal, and slowly lay back on the floor, closed his eyes and curled up in a ball, sucking gently on the tube until the bag was drained dry. Blood was everywhere, soaking his clothes, running down his chin, pouring down his throat and flowing through his veins. It was everything to him; it was his reason for living. There was room for nothing else in what was left of his tattered mind.

After what seemed like hours, he opened his eyes slowly and stared up at the blood-spattered ceiling.

“Adrian?”

“Yes doctor.” He sat up slowly, but decided against trying to stand up. “I think I should...try that again, a bit later.” His mind was racing. He was no longer sure this had been a good idea at all. “You can let me out now. I’ve eaten. And I need to get cleaned up.”

“I don’t think so, Adrian.”

“Why the hell not?! I’m fine now!”

“You don’t look fine to me. You can’t even stand up. And how do we know you’ve finished feeding?”

“Well why don’t you just unlock the door, come on in, and we’ll see what happens,” he said sarcastically.

“No, I think we’ll just wait a bit, try feeding you again in an hour or two and see what develops.”

Adrian absently licked the blood off his claws, then sucked on his blood-soaked sleeve. “I’m in complete control, doctor. And the deal was; you let me out when I feel it’s safe.”

“No. The deal was; I’ll let you out when I feel it’s safe. And frankly, you’re still behaving more like an animal than a human.”

And so I am, he thought. But the interesting thing to him was that he didn’t consider his behavior to be disgusting; it was simply utilitarian. “Am I to understand that you’re not letting me out because of my table manners?” he wiped off his face with the back of his hand, then sucked on his other sleeve.

“Not directly; but rather, because of what it implies.”

Adrian got up and strolled over to the door. “You know, we really don’t know how strong I am. Are you sure this room will hold me?” he grinned into the camera, fangs out and golden eyes blazing. “Because if I have to get out on my own, I’m not going to be in a very good mood.” He jiggled the doorknob.

“It’s noon. The sun is out. Where would you go?”

“To the showers to clean myself off. Then, back to the office. We have a lot of planning to do.”

He heard the click of the lock. He turned the knob, effortlessly swung the heavy iron door open, and stepped into the now-empty observation room. He chuckled to himself and padded barefoot down the hall to the showers, leaving bloody footprints on the white-tiled floor behind him.

Chapter 48: The Fire

The four of them stood at the end of the tarmac as the engines revved up a bit and the plane turned onto the taxiway toward them.

“Well, now there’ll be someone I can talk to that’s my age.” Jason said in mock seriousness. “No offence, but sometimes you three are a bit boring and predictable. And you’re sooo young.”

He winced as Hannah slugged him on the arm particularly hard. “I haven’t heard any complaints before now,” she shouted over the sound of the engines. “Next time, you can ride around the island by yourself. See how bored you get with only yourself for company.” She slugged him again.

§

Ryan and Janice laughed when they spotted the silent but still obvious altercation through the window. “Look at them! Classic brother and sister aren’t they? But Jason is so much taller than Hannah, you’d think she’d be more careful, so as not to get him mad.” Ryan chuckled again.

“He probably doesn’t quite realize it yet, Ryan. From what Hannah told me, they were about the same height until about a year ago.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to tell him.” Ryan pulled their bags out of the overhead, and followed her to the exit.

“Finally!” Jason grabbed Ryan’s hand and pumped it furiously. “I was beginning to think you’d never get here!” He pointed to the hillside on the other side of the runway. “That’s where you two will be staying.”

Janice and Ryan turned to look. The pure-white, two-story apartment building was striking, contrasted against the velvety-green hillside behind it. Ryan counted the windows. “It looks like there could be as many as 32 apartments there, if the other side looks the same.”

“Good guess, but there are actually only 16; four on each side, on each floor. Each one has two windows, and the ones on the end have three. You and Janice have the two second-from-the-end units on the second floor,” Jason explained. “And the roof has an observation deck, a barbeque, and tables for the tenants.”

“Wow! It looks like we’ll have a nice view of your beautiful homes from there!” Janice exclaimed.

“Hannah wanted you to have those so you could see when we all went swimming or were outside, so you could come over,” Eli explained. “She had Jack reserve them for you, which wasn’t easy, by the way, since we had no idea you would be here so soon. The ones on the ends are bigger and were made for families. The building is almost half full already.”

“Thank you, Hannah! Oskar told me you were ‘super thoughtful.’ I can see he was right.” Janice squeezed her hand.

Hannah blushed, “Oskar, you have to stop saying that kind of...stuff.”

“Why should I? Look at the reward I always get. I embarrassed you again!” he stepped back quickly and held his hands out in front of him, defensively. “Don’t hit me!”

“I...wouldn’t...” she blushed again.

“And the frosting on the cake! I got a ‘twofer’ this time.” He laughed.

They all turned when they heard the soft purring of Jonathan’s electric truck. “Let’s put all your luggage in the back and Jason will drive you up the hill in a bit, but first, we have to give you your shots.” Jonathan jumped out and shook their hands vigorously.

“What shots?!” Ryan was beginning to think things were moving a bit fast.

“Everyone on the island is given the vaccine that makes them immune to the bite of a vampire. There’s a lot of the original parasite floating around in various forms in the labs here, and we don’t want to risk the possibility of infection for anyone who stays here.” He winked at him. “The others won’t be in the works for either of you for six months, after which you will have to make a separate decision on each of them. If you last that long.” He winked at them.

He loaded their suitcases in the back, then handed the keys to Jason. “Why don’t you drive us to the clinic, Jason? Then you can help them get settled in up there.”

Oskar, Hannah, and Eli watched them go. “Jason is right, Hannah. I’m sure he’ll have more in common with them, since they’re all about the same age.”

“I know, Eli. But I couldn’t let him get away with it. It’s my job.”

§

“For God’s sake, close the door!” Adrian had enough trouble concentrating through all the new sounds and vibrations that now assaulted his senses without having to deal with those pouring in the open door from the rest of the world. This was going to take some getting used to.

“Have you flown yet?”

Startled, Adrian looked up. *They’ve moved faster than I expected*, he thought to himself. He stood up quickly. “Mr. Wallace! I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was you. He stood up and offered his hand.

Wallace grabbed his hand firmly and shook it – a bit too firmly, in Adrian’s mind. “I hope you realize you’ve used up all your favors. You’re on your own now. One more unauthorized pursuit

and you're gone, no matter how much of an advantage you seem to think you have now. Be assured, your new abilities will only postpone the inevitable. Remember, there are 24 hours in a day, half of which, on average, occur while the sun is up."

Adrian suppressed his anger. "To answer your question, Yes. I've flown. Many times now. And I've become quite good at it, if I do say so myself. Having a pilot's license may or may not have helped, however." He winked at him. "Now then. Here's what I propose as our next attempt to control this situation."

"I don't think you got my point, Adrian. You're to do nothing with respect to this project until further notice. In the meantime, I want you to work closely with Dr. Franklin on cataloging your skills, strengths, and limitations, until we have a better grasp of what you are capable of. And what you aren't. And how much of 'you' still exists, if I'm expressing Dr. Franklin's concerns accurately.

"What!? But this may be our last chance to contain the problem. That's why I..."

"No, the bombs were our last chance to contain the problem. Now, we're just going to have to live with it. Besides the fact that there are now simply too many who know, there's now the child to consider."

"I simply don't agree with your conclusions, sir. Why would she be any different than the others? There's simply no real evidence. In fact, she's the only one who is actually the age she appears. Not only that, but once we begin, her supposed 'abilities' won't matter."

"There will be no beginning! It's empirical evidence, Adrian. Our analysts have gone over this hundreds of times. She's the most likely common factor in everything that's happened, from the overly-quick response of Eli to the kidnapping, to the successful raid on our plant in Manchester, including the speed with which your exact location was deduced, and above all, to the discovery of the bombs, particularly the one in the school. And if we're right, she would know the instant you got close to the island, now that you are, in essence, one of them. You stood a better chance as a human, although one of our analysts insists she has...other skills which have apparently allowed them to anticipate moves that were planned only for the future. The ramifications of that theory are frightening, if true. And remember, as petite as she is, she still has 70% of your strength and endurance; the same as the others who have taken the injection. Don't underestimate her."

"You may be right, but she's just a child! She's harmless and she's only 14 years old." he said sarcastically. "You're going to give up that easily?"

"You've never understood when it's time to stop, cut your losses and work to mitigate the damage, have you? It becomes personal, and you lose all perspective. I'm telling you to drop it now. Your abilities will be quite useful to us in the future, unless you persist in this nonsense."

"Are you threatening me?" Adrian stood up and glared at him with his golden eyes.

Wallace met his gaze, unflinchingly. “Try us,” he said softly, “and as I said, your abilities will only postpone the inevitable.” He turned to leave, and without looking back, slammed the door behind him. He knew Adrian would calm down eventually; he always did, given enough time. *Unless, of course, Dr. Franklin is right...*

§

Hannah’s eyes opened suddenly. She felt a deep sense of foreboding, but couldn’t seem to find the cause. She looked at the clock: 2:00AM. She reached out tentatively to each of them in turn, but everyone was sound asleep. Even Jack. She felt so uneasy that, had he been awake, she would have risked intruding on his thoughts, even though she had vowed never to do it again.

She tossed and turned for a while, trying to get back to sleep, but it was no use. Finally, disgusted with herself, she sat up in bed, propped up her pillow and tried to slow down her racing mind by thinking of pleasant times; gentler times when the three of them were still discovering each other. With a bit of effort, she could see Eli and Oskar asleep in his bed, arms wrapped around each other; something she often did in the mornings before they woke up because it made her so calm and relaxed. It was one of the odd things about her ability that seemed almost mystical; that she could only do this unique thing when the two of them were together, touching one another. Then, and only then, was the vision as clear as crystal. It was almost as though it took the three of them to make the magic, a sort of ‘magical triangle,’ as Eli had put it after that first time it happened, a few days before she flew with her fairy wings. Jack was still trying to figure it all out, and that, of course, made it all the more fun.

She slid out of bed and looked out the window across the compound. The lights in Ryan’s apartment were still on and she was tempted to give him a call, but she knew she’d feel foolish trying to explain her feelings to him; they would sound silly because she just couldn’t put them into the proper words. But they persisted. She turned on her computer and tried for a while to concentrate on her reading assignment, but it was no use; she could even feel it in the pit of her stomach.

Finally, she put on her slippers, went quietly down the stairs and stepped out on the back porch. The night air was comfortably cool and crisp, there was a sliver of a moon, and the stars were brilliant against the black sky. She could barely see the beginnings of the fog bank making a feeble attempt to breach the hills above the village, but she sensed it wasn’t going to make it tonight; it was too close to morning. She tried reaching out into the future, but her heart wasn’t in it. She just didn’t feel like waking up fully enough to do it effectively. She sighed and sat down on the porch steps, elbows on her knees, chin in her hands and eyes closed. She idly reached out into the darkness as she had done that night with Eli as they headed toward Manchester, and again felt the presence of the others far away on the mainland, with their cold, inhuman thoughts, and their tiny needle pricks of mindless cruelty and sadism, and their half-sleep. Her curiosity finally got the better of her despite her revulsion, and as she probed deeper, they gradually became more distinct, more personal, like black pins on a map rather than merely a gray all-encompassing fog. And the white noise of their dark murmurings grew in intensity until it sounded like the roar of a stadium crowd; thousands of distinct voices, gravelly, irritating, and

demanding. And as she moved cautiously through the vast crowd, they gradually became fewer, more focused, more purposeful, more concentrated, more threatening...

A small sound startled her out of her half-dream. Her eyes opened suddenly, and it was there, fully-formed, standing on the edge of the lawn, golden eyes glowing in the darkness. She shook her head to clear the dark thoughts out of her mind, but the apparition stubbornly remained, unmoving.

Then, as she watched helplessly, frozen to the spot, it began moving rapidly and purposefully toward her. She gasped once as she felt its ice-cold hands on her throat and tried to scramble away, but it was too late. She grabbed its wrists and, with all her strength, tried to free herself but they were rigid and unyielding. She felt herself being lifted off the ground, arms and legs flailing in the air, but despite her best efforts, she was pulled firmly up against it. She could feel its cold skin, disgustingly damp and hairless, pressing against her own. She could smell its foul, rotten breath. She could sense its raw physical strength, and its single-minded purpose – her death. She struggled to breathe, but it was impossible. It tightened its grip forcing her head back, bared its fangs, pressed them against her neck, and squeezed even harder. She fought as hard as she could but finally her strength ebbed away, and she felt her arms go limp and drop uselessly to her sides. All she could feel now were her burning lungs. All she could see was the starlit sky through strands of its jet-black hair. She jerked reflexively as she felt its fangs sink into her neck. The stars got unbearably bright for a moment, then winked out one by one, and the blackness rose up and enveloped her.

§

Adrian set the timer for 45 minutes, listened carefully for any sounds or any other indication that he had been seen or heard, then flew north over the low hills between the village and the compound. He circled the new apartments south of the runway, made a mental note of the fact that the lights were on in one of the north-side apartments on the second floor, then settled in on the side of the hill where he had an unobstructed view of the compound. He methodically unpacked his backpack, did a quick inventory, repacked it, then sat back and waited, watching the compound carefully for any sign of life.

He had deliberately eaten lightly before he left, partly because the raging hunger heightened his senses, but mainly because the thought of killing and feeding on his first real victims excited him; not part of THE plan, but definitely part of HIS plan. He might not be able to change the future now, but he could certainly reduce the numbers who would witness it. As far as he was concerned, he would be done only when all those who had been on the plane that night, including the pilot, were dead. And he had a special treat for those few he would dine on.

He tensed up as a dim light suddenly appeared in a window in the northernmost house. A light in Hannah's room, he realized. He waited. If she were awake, she would find him soon enough if Wallace's analysts were right. A part of him hoped she would. It would cause momentary chaos in the compound, and when the timer went off, it might even bring some individuals outside before their numbers increased to the point at which he would no longer have the advantage. He relished the thought of rushing in amongst them and tearing them limb from limb. He was

trembling in anticipation now. *All that beautiful blood! And the beautiful rebalancing of the scales.*

The porch door opened suddenly and she stepped outside. He couldn't believe his luck. She was completely alone and helpless if only he could get close enough. He watched her sit down on the step and rest her chin on her hands. *Hannah! If Wallace could see her now, he'd understand how stupid his analysts were. There's no substitution for doing your own field work.* He watched her carefully for a few minutes more. *Perhaps she's waiting for someone,* he thought. He watched the other houses for a few minutes, but there was no sign of life. He looked at her more carefully and realized her eyes were closed. *She doesn't know I'm here at all! Wallace was wrong!* He quickly put on his backpack, lifted off and glided silently down the hill over the impossibly white compound wall and across the perfectly manicured lawn. He landed softly no more than two meters in front of her. Again, he scanned all four homes carefully, but there was no sign of life anywhere. *They've underestimated me again,* he thought to himself, smugly.

She opened her eyes and stared directly at him, but strangely, she didn't react at first. He decided not to take any chances. He moved forward quickly, grabbed her by the neck and squeezed firmly, savoring the moment, as her eyes got big and she struggled against him. When one of her flailing fists accidentally connected with the side of his head, he finally woke up to the fact that, at least in this one thing, Wallace was right. She was quite strong. He squeezed her neck even tighter and pulled her up against him so she could no longer get the leverage necessary to cause him any more discomfort.

The fact that he knew he was going to kill her now, excited him somehow. It wouldn't be the first time of course, but it would be the first time with his bare hands – and his new 'partner.'

But even as he reveled at the thought, everything changed. Afterwards, he thought perhaps it had been the fear in her eyes, or the sound of her rapid heartbeat, or the movement of blood through her veins – he was never quite sure what roused it. But it was awake now, and took over with a vengeance.

It squeezed her neck hard enough to crush an iron pipe, but still she lived. But unlike itself, she still had to breathe – or so the Doctor had told him. As its fangs grew and instinctively pressed against her neck, what was left of Adrian watched detached as she became weaker and weaker until finally her arms dropped to her sides, and her struggling came to a slow stop. He heard the flesh tear and the tendons snap when it bit into her neck, then he lost himself momentarily in the ecstasy of the moment. She jerked once, and was still.

He angrily elbowed his way back into control and pushed the other one aside. "No! I'm going to do this my way!" With a herculean effort, he pulled his fangs free of her neck, held her out in front of him, legs dangling two feet off the ground, squeezed her neck tightly and counted slowly. "One...two...three..." When he had counted off ten minutes, he eased her to the ground, put his ear to her chest and listened. There was nothing. The wound on her neck, as deep as it was, had stopped bleeding. And his bloodlust, solely because he had interrupted the feeding, was even more forceful than before; almost orgasmic. His anticipation of the rest of this evening's events was pure pornography to him now. And he reveled in it.

He took a set of shackles out of his backpack and cuffed her hands behind her back, then put another around her ankles. *No sense in taking any chances*, he thought.

As he picked up her impossibly light body and threw it over his shoulder, he felt her long, black, lavender-scented hair spread itself softly across his bare back. He moved rapidly across the lawn, glancing behind him periodically to make sure all was quiet, then walked across the beautiful white tile surrounding the pool, hesitated a moment by the diving board, then knelt down, slipped her body off his shoulder and rolled it quietly into the water. He watched, detached, as it came to rest on the bottom, then stayed a bit longer until the bubbles stopped rising. *One down, one to go*, he thought to himself. Oskar was next on his list. Once the last of the telepaths was dispatched, he could do his work much more effectively.

He spread his wings and flew south over the fence, circled over the dark green hills above the village watching for any signs of life, then dropped down quietly again on the side of the hill above the compound. And waited. There were no lights on in the Dawson house.

Ryan stood at his window for a few minutes, trying to figure out which of them had just flown over the building. And why. And what was he doing by the pool? Whoever it was, he was sure it wasn't Sava. Sava was much shorter and stockier. He slipped on his shoes, grabbed his phone off the dresser and headed down the stairs. He couldn't sleep anyway, and maybe whoever it was, was having the same problem. And he felt like talking to someone.

§

The ripples in the pool gradually subsided, and a lone slipper floated languidly, half submerged, in the shadow of the diving board. In the cold darkness at the bottom of the pool, Hannah's heart beat – once.

§

Oskar and Eli awoke to the sound of the siren. Oskar leaped out of bed and rushed to his window, where a bright red glow was visible just over the southern hills. "Eli, something's on fire! Come look!"

She was next to him in an instant. "We need to get Papa, Oskar! Is anyone else up?" They could hear voices coming from down the hall. *Mama and Papa are already up, Oskar.*

"Jack's up, Eli. Jonathan called and told him the school was on fire. The village fire engine is already on its way."

Papa, already dressed, came hurriedly out of his room and headed down the stairs. "Your mom is already downstairs, kids. Get dressed as fast as you can and come on down. We'll go over there together and see if there's anything we can do to help. Jonathan is already on his way, and Sava..."

“I know, Dad. Sava is already there. He says the whole south end of the school is on fire and it’s spreading rapidly. And he’s very angry about something, but I can’t ...get it all.”

“Is anyone up over at the Sandstrøm’s, Oskar?”

“No, Dad. Should I go on over and get them?”

“Use the phone, Oskar. It’s quicker.”

“Mr. Sandstrøm is up, Dad. Mom just called. Now Mrs. Sandstrom...and Jason...”

“I’ll go get Hannah, Papa.”

“We don’t have enough time, Eli. Let her come with her family. We’ll all be there in a few minutes anyway.”

“She’s not up yet, Eli. I can’t find her.” Oskar paused. “And Mrs. Sandstrøm can’t find her either, Dad. She thinks she’s over here. She’s probably on her way.” He rushed out the back door, still a bit puzzled that he couldn’t see her, but Hannah did have the ability to shut him out, he remembered...

Adrian stood up quickly as soon as he saw Oskar fling open the back door. He leaped aggressively into the air, knowing that since the lights in both homes were on now, he didn’t have to worry about being spotted in the darkness. His wings pounded the air furiously as he flew down the hill, dipped over the fence, and flew low across the lawn toward him. At this speed, he calculated that he would have him just about the time he started up the steps to the Sandstrøm home. And Oskar’s back would be to him.

§

Ryan had just turned around and headed back up the hill at the sound of the siren, when he caught the sudden movement out of the corner of his eye. *There he is again! And he’s flying down across the lawn towards...* He spotted Oskar running across the porch and down the steps, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. He didn’t know why, but he was absolutely certain that something wasn’t right. He punched the Dawson’s quick-dial number. Elaine answered almost immediately. “Mrs. Dawson! It’s Ryan. There’s a...vampire after Oskar! I saw him fly down off the hill as soon as Oskar ran out the door!” He half expected her to laugh and tell him it was Sava, or Dr. Dawson, but she didn’t. Instead, he heard the phone hit the floor, and saw her sprint out the door toward Oskar. But Ryan could already see she was too late. In a few more seconds, it would be on him. He held his breath...

Suddenly, Oskar saw himself through Adrian’s eyes. He spun around, read him instantly, and tried to dodge out of the way, but it was too late. Adrian’s talons clamped down on his shoulders firmly, digging into his flesh. He felt his feet leave the ground, and in the blink of an eye, he was airborne.

Chapter 49: The Miracle

“This fire was deliberately set, Jonathan!” Sava was furious. “Here’s what’s left of the timer, and the smell of gasoline speaks for itself!”

Jonathan couldn’t smell anything but he certainly wasn’t going to question Sava’s sense of smell. He was almost certainly right. “But why, Sava? And why the school, of all buildings?”

“Don’t take it personally, Jonathan,” he chided. “It’s clearly a distraction, and was probably picked because it’s one of the larger buildings, and since there’s no one here at night, the fire could fully establish itself before anyone noticed. Has the compound been notified?”

“Of course! It’s the first thing I did.”

“And I suppose you warned them that this was a distraction? And to keep their eyes open for suspicious activity?”

Jonathan’s silence told him everything he needed to know.

“Call them now! They need to be particularly careful, since almost the entire brain-trust of the operation is contained within those white walls – no offence, Jonathan.”

The fire, although largely under control where they were standing, continued to burn fiercely on the north side of the building, throwing embers high into the air. Most of the island inhabitants were up now, training their hoses on their roofs and extinguishing the stray embers as they floated slowly to the ground. The entire volunteer fire department was on hand, including most of their able-bodied family members. In spite of everything Sava had said, Jonathan felt a personal satisfaction in the fact that they were all working together as a team, just as he had envisioned.

“Jonathan! You need to call them now! They may be the actual target, don’t you understand?” Sava suddenly jerked as though he had been struck by a bullet. “Damn it!! Adrian is here, and he has Oskar.” Without another word he leaped into the air and disappeared through the smoke and embers. Jonathan caught sight of him again for a brief moment as he flew low over the hill toward the compound.

§

Elaine lunged forward, but she was too late. All she could do now was watch helplessly as Adrian, with Oskar held tightly in his talons, flew rapidly to the west, hugging the ground. She stripped off her shirt, unfurled her wings, and lifted off after him. Eli rushed out the door, and quickly followed her Mama into the air.

“Don’t! Eli, he’s too strong for you. Let Mama handle it,” Dawson screamed after her, in vain.

Nils and Livia rushed over as the three figures disappeared into the darkness to the west. “Richard, Hannah is missing! We can’t find her anywhere! Her computer was on, but she’s nowhere in the house!”

“Are you sure, Livia? She’s definitely not here.” He started down the steps toward their house.

“Dad! One of her slippers is here in the grass by the step,” Jason shouted.

Jack hurried up beside him, and grabbed it out of his hand. “It’s hers, Livia. I recognize it too.” He examined the ground carefully, then dropped to the ground suddenly. “There’s blood here! And more in this direction! His heart was in his throat. He took a few steps away from the house. “But it stops here!” His voice was shaking now. “Something’s happened to her! Damn it! We should have listened to Sava!”

“They’re all gone now, Jack.” Dawson’s voice was just a whisper. “It was Adrian. He grabbed Oskar and flew off with him. Elaine followed him. And Eli followed her.” He sat down hard on the step. “They’ll be no match for him, Jack! He’s a real vampire now. They don’t have his strength. He’ll kill them all!”

“Come on! We’ll follow them as best we can. Perhaps they can stall him long enough for us to use the Elilights on him. Get the lights, Doctor! I’ll get the Rover. He sprinted toward his house.

“Nils, you and Livia go see what’s going on at the school, then call us. Take your Elilights with you just in case, and tell Jonathan to break them out and pass them around. We don’t have many, but we know how effective they can be. Hannah is probably with Adrian, Nils. We’ll get her back, I promise.”

Within five minutes the compound was empty and silent. The Land Rover’s lights could be seen bouncing across the low hills to the west and the Sandstrøm’s car had just disappeared around the last corner as it sped up the hill toward the school. The three homes were brilliantly lit and the doors stood open, mere empty shells now. But soon, one of them would come to their aid in a most unexpected way.

§

The pain in Oskar’s shoulders was almost unbearable, but he was still conscious. Conscious enough, at least, to read Adrian’s thoughts, and what was in store for him. They were flying no more than 20 feet above the ground, following the contours of the rolling hills, but he knew Eli and Mom could see everything through his eyes, and as he recognized landmarks, so could they. And they were gaining on them. His disadvantage was that, because he was facing backwards, he could only see where they had been, not where they were going.

His mind was racing. He knew Adrian was aware of his abilities, so as long as he thought he was unconscious, he was relatively safe; at least until Adrian reached his destination, which he still couldn’t see. He suspected that Adrian hadn’t decided yet where he was going to kill him.

Adrian spotted a dark area in the hills near the ocean, banked quickly to the north and dipped down into Hannah's valley. Oskar could see they were descending rapidly, and held his breath, ready to run as soon as he loosened his grip, but instead of stopping, Adrian suddenly flew straight up for about 100 feet, then let go of him. The change of mind came so quickly that Oskar, caught by surprise, had no time to react. He tore off his shirt and tried to grow his wings, but it was too late. He tumbled through the air like a rag doll, striking the valley floor with a loud smack.

Eli gasped when she saw Adrian drop Oskar, then screamed when she heard his body hit the ground. She surged ahead of Mama and dove into the valley, but was struck immediately from above and driven, face-first, into the hard rock wall by the cave.

To Elaine, when Oskar hit the ground it was as though the both of them had suddenly winked out of existence. She dropped abruptly to the ground, digging her talons into the loose earth at the edge of the valley. She was determined not to make the same mistake Eli had. She moved rapidly along the ridge to the top of the rock wall, leaned over the edge and saw Adrian with his hands around Eli's neck. Her claws were out and Adrian's face was already raw and bloody. Using the cliff for leverage, she lashed out with her talons over and over again, until Adrian's clothes were ripped to shreds and the contents of his backpack were strewn across the small valley floor. But still he held her in his iron grip, and Elaine could see Eli was getting weaker by the minute.

This will end now! She leaped off the cliff, wrapped both talons around his head, and with a powerful thrust of her wings, dragged him away from Eli and across the valley toward the sea.

Eli leaped up and rushed over to Oskar, who was lying face-first in the soft earth right where Jason had spread out their blanket – so long ago, it seemed now – when Hannah had found the cave. She rolled him over and breathed a sigh of relief when he sucked in a lungful of air. She brushed the dirt off his face, kissed him gently on the lips, and began running her hands methodically over his body, searching first for compound fractures, then dislocations, then blood. But there was nothing. *Hannah's beautiful valley saved his life*, she thought to herself. *If he had hit the cliff or the rocks further down the valley...* she didn't want to think about it.

She stood up quickly when she heard Mama scream out in pain. She heard the distinct crack and watched in horror as Adrian broke her arm across his knee, and drove his other one into her chest, pinning her to the rocky ground. She grunted in pain, spun away from him, then rolled over and stood up quickly, arm dangling uselessly at her side. Her remaining claw raked the side of his head, caught his ear, and almost ripped it off. Oblivious to the pain, he kicked her hard in the chest, heel first. Again Eli heard the sound of bones cracking. This time, Mama hit the ground like a rock, rolled over on her back, and was still. Adrian snatched up a huge boulder and raised it high over his head, but before he could deliver the fatal blow, Eli rushed down on them, dug her talons into his back and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He dropped the boulder, reached behind him and plucked her off his back as though she were a bug, then pinned her arms to the ground over her head and pressed his knee firmly against her chest. "Now I'm going to kill you!" he hissed. "Then your 'Mama,' and then Oskar."

She struggled hard, managed to get one arm free and grabbed what was left of his left ear tightly in her claw. She twisted it back and forth until she felt the leathery skin tearing, then jerked hard, and felt it come away in her hand.

He snarled at her, eyes blazing. “Killing Hannah didn’t give me nearly the pleasure I’ll get from killing you! She didn’t put up much of a fight at all!” He swung hard and caught her squarely in the forehead, snapping her head back hard against the rocky ground. “But first, because you’re on my short list, you’re going to have the honor of being my first real meal!”

He lunged for her throat, but never got close. A dark shape hit him hard, spun him around and slammed him up against the side of the cliff. He instantly leaped to his feet. “At last! I was beginning to think you’d never show up. What’s the matter? Did I catch you napping?”

Sava tackled him low, spun him around and threw him hard through the narrow entrance to the valley onto the gravel beach. Adrian scrambled to his feet, unfurled his wings and soared up over Sava’s head towards Oskar, and was immediately struck in midflight from below.

Sava wrapped his legs around him, retracted his wings and thrust his claws into Adrian’s chest just above his heart, to little effect. They tumbled out of the sky together, struck the ground hard just east of the valley, and rolled to a stop. They were both on their feet in an instant, and at each other like a pair of enraged bears.

Sava knew that he had to keep the battle as far from his beloved family as possible so they would have a chance, however remote, to get away; and with that foremost in mind, either forced or enticed Adrian further and further away from the valley. But he paid a price for it each time he allowed Adrian an opening. He was also at a disadvantage because he was frightened; not for his life but for theirs. He couldn’t remember a single time in his long life when he had ever cared more for another’s life than his own, but he remained fatalistic about it. It was what it was.

§

“We’ve lost them, Jack! Something must have happened to Oskar!” Richard stood up on the running board and scanned the low hills for any sign of movement, or any sound, but there was nothing.

“Let’s keep going in this direction, Dr. Dawson. If we stay close to the hills, we’ll be high enough to spot them, unless they’ve headed out to sea or are down along the beach. If we don’t see them by the time we reach the western cliffs, we’ll double back along the beach.” He started the car, made sure his Elilight was secure in the console, then started off slowly across the bumpy terrain. In spite of his fear for their safety and the strong sense of urgency, he simply couldn’t stop thinking about Hannah and where she might be, and whether she was alone and frightened, or even badly injured and in pain. He had no idea how long ago she had been taken, which made it even worse for him. She might even be....

“I firmly believe we’ll find them, Jack. And Hannah too. There’s simply no rational reason for him to hurt her.” It was almost as though he had read Jack’s mind.

“I hope you’re right, Doctor, but I can’t help but think how frightened she must be wherever she is.” But he knew in his heart why Adrian would want to kill her. Because of her abilities. In fact, even logically, he would have no other choice. And he was already sadistic enough before he became a vampire, so all Jack could hope for was that, if he had killed her, it had been quick and painless.

He stomped on the gas and the Rover surged forward in a cloud of dirt and gravel. He simply couldn’t think about it anymore.

§

As she lay on her back in the darkness, all Eli could think about was Adrian’s final words. Hannah was dead! And she hadn’t put up much of a fight. Her sweet Hannah; her blood sister; her soulmate. Her heart ached for her. *That pretty much sums up Hannah, doesn’t it? She couldn’t even fight back to save her life. It simply wasn’t in her nature.*

She thought about their first meeting, and how sweet, kind and gentle she had been – everything she wasn’t. And sometimes, late at night after Oskar was asleep, she lay awake and wondered if she would have been like her if she could have grown up as a normal child. Finally, she had realized that Hannah represented everything she could never be, no matter how much she wanted it, because, even in the short time she had been aging and her sense of reality and her understanding of actions and consequences had matured, her culpability for her past life had risen up to haunt her. Her youth had been a weakness, not an excuse; not even a valid reason, she realized. When the chips were down, there were no excuses for what she had done.

Even her love for Oskar was in question. She found herself doubting its very validity. Was it real, or was it a love born of desperation; of loneliness; of the selfish needs of a selfish child? Mightn’t Oskar have been better off without her? Perhaps not, in retrospect, but she had taken him away when she had no such assurances. She took him even though she didn’t know what might happen to them.

And if they hadn’t found Papa? What then? When they ran out of money, would she have begun killing again? Would she finally have turned Oskar and brought him into her darkness just so she wouldn’t be alone? She couldn’t bear thinking about it, but she couldn’t stop. All those people! All those innocent people! And after Oskar was dark, there would have been even more. Would she have cared? Would there finally have been regrets? Or would she have remained the selfish, self-absorbed child she had been for over 200 years?

Elaine groaned softly, rubbed her arm, and slowly sat up. Her ribs still ached, but she knew they were almost healed. She heard Eli sobbing quietly next to her, and gently reached over and caressed her face. “My little Butterfly,” she whispered softly. She gathered her up in her arms, and pulled her up against her. Further up the valley, she could hear Oskar’s steady breathing and his strong heartbeat, and breathed a sigh of relief. She stood up slowly and carried Eli up to

where Oskar lay, then knelt down and laid her gently on the soft ground next to him. Eli rolled herself into a ball and turned over on her side, still sobbing uncontrollably. Elaine took Oskar's hands in hers, sensed his presence, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was unconscious, but not injured; at least not any more. She raised her head at the distant but recognizable sound of the approaching Land Rover, then, though still reluctant to leave them even for a minute, leaped up over the edge of the low cliff and sprinted rapidly in the direction of the sound.

"There she is!" Richard cried out. Jack stepped on the gas and roared across the rolling hills toward her, feeling a glimmer of hope for the first time since he found Hannah's blood in the grass. Richard was out the car even before it had come to a stop. He grabbed her in his arms and kissed her hard on the cheek. "I thought you were dead! I thought you were all dead!"

"Sava saved us, Rich. But I have no idea where they are now. They were fighting furiously the last time I saw them, but the sounds faded away to the west. I'm really worried! He would have come back if he had won."

"And Adrian would have come back if he hadn't, Elaine." He kissed her again. "Are the kids okay?"

"They're in Hannah's valley, Rich. Oskar is unconscious... But he's okay," she added quickly when she saw the look on his face. "Eli is...I'm not sure how she's doing. Physically, she's okay, but she's quite shaken up." She looked at Jack, then down at her feet. "Adrian...Adrian told Eli he had..." she choked up.

Jack's legs gave out on him, and he sat down hard on the running board.

"Hannah's gone, Jack! Our sweet Hannah is gone!" The tears welled up in her eyes.

"How can you be so sure, Elaine? Maybe he was lying! Just to throw her off balance." Jack simply wouldn't and couldn't accept what she was saying.

"Eli was touching him when he told her, Jack. He couldn't have lied to her." She sat down next to him and put her arm around him.

"We need to get Oskar and Eli, then try to help Sava, Elaine. This is not over as long as that...monster is still alive." Richard helped her into the car. Jack drove the short distance back to the valley and waited in the car while they brought the children up.

Detached and still in shock, Jack remained in the driver's seat while Richard wrapped Oskar in a blanket, laid him carefully on the rear seat, and sat on the floor next to him.

Eli curled up in Elaine's lap, crying softly against her chest, and they silently shared their grief with one another as the Land Rover gained speed and bounced along the base of the hills towards the compound.

§

Sava spotted the headlights in the distance and saw Elaine leap out of the valley. He knew Adrian would see her if he didn't do something quickly. Fighting against his strongest survival instincts as well as his ego, he turned and ran. Adrian was after him in a flash.

Sava knew he could outrun him easily in spite of Adrian's longer stride, but he deliberately kept him close until they were safely out of sight of the valley. Then he turned and lunged for him, catching him off balance just long enough for him to sink his fangs into his neck. Adrian growled with rage and raked his back with his claws, trying vainly to free himself from Sava's iron grip, but the more he struggled the more the blood flowed.

Taking advantage of his height, Adrian leaned back hard until Sava's talons lost their grip on the rocky soil, then threw him to the ground, ripping himself free. But with every beat of his heart, the blood still surged from his gaping wound. Enraged, he bit down hard on Sava's inner thigh, severing his Femoral artery, but the instant the blood touched his lips, he was once again lost in ecstasy and he drank, oblivious to the fact that he was still losing copious amounts of blood himself.

Sava knew they were both in trouble now. The anticoagulant their fangs produced was quite effective, even on their own kind; a fact he had learned long ago in a different, even darker, encounter. He grabbed a large rock and brought it down hard on Adrian's head over and over again, until finally, he felt him relax his grip just a bit. It was just enough for him to twist away, leap to his feet and kick Adrian hard in the groin before he could react. He unfurled his wings and leaped into the air toward the compound. He knew no one was there now, so he hoped he could finish this with no further collateral damage.

But even as he heard the sound of Adrian's wings close behind him, he felt himself getting weak from his own loss of blood. He knew he should tie off the wound to give it time to heal itself, but there wasn't time. He simply had to get Adrian safely away from everyone.

He could see the compound ahead of him now, with three of the houses still lit up like Christmas trees, but empty. He glanced behind him, and could see clearly that Adrian was weakened also, but in his single-minded desire for revenge, appeared not to notice. *Good! He'll overestimate his strength now.* He feathered his wings suddenly, dropped down behind him, then rose up, grabbed his leg above the knee, and lunged for his femoral artery, but Adrian was too quick for him. He rolled over on his back, summersaulted in the air, and sank his fangs into Sava's neck. They tumbled out of the air together and struck the ground hard near the Dawson's porch.

Sava struggled to get away, but now he was losing blood twice as fast as before, and knew he only had a few minutes at best before he would be incapable of defending himself. With Adrian still fastened firmly to his neck, he struggled to his feet, realizing at last that he was probably going to lose the battle. Adrian's wound was already beginning to heal, and the blood flow had slowed to a trickle. And he was in no position to do any more damage. Unless...

He saw the welcoming light pouring through the open door on the Dawson porch, and regretted that he had still not made the time to visit them in their new home. It was one of his failings,

something he had often told himself he needed to work on. But living centuries with another who was just like him had had its effects and established habits that were hard to break. But he knew what he had to do now. It was the only way. If he died and Adrian lived, the others would die tonight; of that he was certain.

Lost in the rapture once again, Adrian wrapped his legs around Sava's waist, held him tightly against him and drank deeply, allowing the beast complete control now. This time, their goals were complementary, and he was at peace. Still, he reveled in the knowledge that once Sava was gone, the others would die easily and quickly at his hand. Perhaps that was why he didn't notice or care that Sava stumbled slowly up the steps to the porch, haltingly made his way across it, leaning on the railing as his legs began to fail, then lunged with the last of his strength through the door and halfway into the kitchen before falling to the floor, unconscious.

§

The Rover hit the end of the runway and Jack poured on the coal. He slowed just a bit as he turned sharply to the left onto the taxiway, then sped up again. He skidded to a stop at the end of the tarmac, grabbed his own Elilight off the console, and the three of them ran across the lawn, scanning the darkness with their lights.

Eli held Oskar tightly in her arms in the back seat of the Rover. He was beginning to stir, and she was determined to be the first thing he saw when he woke up. But she held her own lamp firmly in her hand, half-hoping that Adrian would make an appearance.

Elaine stopped short when she spotted a tall dark silhouette in the open doorway on the porch. "It's Adrian, Rich!"

Before they could react, he roared in pain and rage, took a few short steps, fell off the edge of the porch, and writhed in agony on the damp grass. Blood was everywhere. He struggled to his feet, tottered towards them, then collapsed at their feet, a bloody mass of grey, mottled flesh.

"He went in uninvited, Rich. Why would he do that? It's a vampire's strongest instinct. He simply couldn't make a mistake like that."

Richard raised his Elilight, but Elaine grabbed his arm and held it down. "Don't!"

"He's going to die, Elaine. I just wanted to..."

"I don't!"

"Where is she, Adrian? Where's Hannah?" Jack shouted.

Adrian grimaced, grinned at him, and coughed up black gouts of blood. "Dead!" he hissed.

Jack straddled him and pounded on his chest with his fists. "Where is she?!"

Adrian laughed, coughing up more blood in the process. "I'll tell her 'hello' for you when I see her again." He stopped breathing, and his still-open eyes rapidly vanished beneath pools of dark blood.

Elaine grabbed Jack's arm and firmly pulled him to his feet. "He's dead, Jack."

"Damn him to hell!" Jack kicked him in the side of the head. Without another word, he hurried back across the lawn toward the Land Rover, and the children.

"Where's Sava, Elaine?!" Richard started up the steps. "He may need our help."

It suddenly hit her. "He's never been in our home, Richard!" she hurried past him. "My God, Rich! That's what must have happened. Sava dragged or fought him into the house, knowing what would happen to both of them if he did!"

She rushed into the kitchen, and there he was, sitting on the floor, his back against the kitchen cabinets and an empty bag in his hand. He grinned up at her. "I'm quite happy that you had one of these on hand, Elaine. I know Ejuice would have worked too, but nothing beats the real thing." He tried to get up, but quickly slumped back down. "I'm fine, really. Just give me a few..."

She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of Ejuice. "If you don't like the taste, just hold your nose," she chided. "You're staying right where you are until Rich says you're okay." She paused, "By the way, I guess it's too late to say 'you can come in,' isn't it?"

They heard the Rover pull up outside and the door bang against the wall as Eli rushed in. "Sava! You saved my life! And Mama's! And Oskar's!" she jumped in his lap and hugged him.

He grunted in pain. "Take it easy, Angel. I believe you're just a bit stronger than I am right now." He grinned at her, then looked up at Rich. "Adrian? Is he..."

"Dead, Sava. He bled out. Just as you should have." Richard looked at him questioningly.

"I don't know, Doctor. I'm at a loss too. I fully expected..."

"To die?" Eli held his face in her hands, and kissed him gently on the forehead. "You can't die when you enter your own home, Sava. Didn't you know that?" she kissed him again.

"But it isn't my home, Eli. It's yours."

"Papa told you that you were part of our family, Sava. Didn't you believe him? Papa never lies, you know." She smiled at him. "And he's never wrong."

"That has to be it, Rich. It happened with Eli, and now with Sava. Perhaps the unwritten laws governing such things aren't as inviolable as I thought," Elaine mused.

Richard checked Sava's heart rate, and pronounced him fit. "...at least in human terms, Sava. But I have no doubt you'll become your usual vampirically strong and arrogant self in no time at all." He winked at him.

The door swung open suddenly. "Where do you want me to put Oskar, Doctor? He's going to be coming around soon. He's already been groaning a bit, and he's said Eli's name several times now." Jack winked at her.

Dawson took him gently in his arms, carried him into the living room, and laid him out on the couch. Elaine helped Sava up, and they sat together on the love seat next to him.

Eli knelt in front of the couch, took his hand in hers and closed her eyes. She could feel his half-awareness of her, and deliberately kept Hannah's death as far away from him as she could. She knew she'd have to tell him soon, but his not knowing it right now was precious to her; a temporary illusion that kept him from taking that short step into the terrible, dark present, where Hannah no longer existed. She kissed him gently, and felt his hand tighten against hers.

"He's going to be okay, Papa! I just know he is!" she fell silent. "How can I tell him, Mama? I just can't! Will you do it for me? ...No, I have to do it!" she burst into tears. "I hate this!" she backed away from him, afraid to touch him; afraid that he would know too soon.

Elaine once again took her in her arms. "I'll tell him, Butterfly. Don't you worry, I'll tell him," she whispered. Eli sobbed quietly against her chest.

The phone rang suddenly. Jack quickly stepped into the dining room and picked it up. He talked quietly for a few minutes, then came in and sat down next to Elaine. "Jonathan says the fire is out, and the computer lab, although smoke-damaged, is pretty much intact. But everything else is a goner. The island security team has found no other indications that anyone else but Adrian was involved in this. He promised to send someone over right away to get rid of..." his voice trailed off.

Richard stood up quickly as the back door opened again, slowly this time. Janice stepped in, followed by Ryan, carrying Hannah's limp body in his arms. Water pooled up on the kitchen floor and her wet pajamas clung tightly to her petite frame.

Chapter 50: Hannah's Light

Ryan let the phone ring several times before he gave up and hurried back up the hill. He wanted desperately to help them, but Jonathan had told him in no uncertain terms that he was not to go out without an Elilight. Janice's lights were still off, so he'd have to go get the lamp himself. He hurried up the steps, but saw her window light up just as he was entering the building. He called again. "Janice? There's been a fire at the school, but it's out now. But Oskar was taken by Adrian, and the others went after them. And Hannah's missing!"

"Slow down, Ryan. Adrian took Oskar? Again?"

"Aye. But he's a vampire now, Janice! And the others..."

"What should we do, Ryan?" Janice was already half dressed.

"Jonathan told us to stay safely inside. But he also said not to go out without an Elilight. So I thought..."

"Where is it, Ryan? The light, I mean?"

"With the fire extinguishers on each floor! I've just gotten one from a first floor extinguisher cabinet." He ran up the steps and rushed into her room. "We'll get the one from across the hall when you're ready."

She grinned at him. "Give me a couple of minutes, Ryan." He suddenly realized she was still talking to him on the phone.

"Uh...you can put the phone down now, Janice. I'm right here." He grabbed her shoulder and spun her completely around, grinning. "A bit slow tonight are we?"

"Well, see how quick you are when you're rudely awakened in the middle of the night!" She grinned back, tossed her phone on the bed and slipped into her trainers.

They grabbed a second Elilight and hurried down the stairs while Ryan filled her in on everything he had seen and heard. "So you saw Adrian fly away with Oskar? Was he still okay?"

"I couldn't tell, Janice. It all happened so fast." They stood on the top step for a minute watching the compound, but there was no sign of life now. Janice pointed to the hills to the west. There's the Rover, Ryan. They must be chasing Adrian."

"But they're heading this way. That may mean that Adrian is heading this way too." He opened the door and pulled her back in. No matter how much they wanted to help, he wasn't about to risk a confrontation with Adrian.

He couldn't see much through the tinted glass door, but the Rover was clearly visible as it sped down the runway and pulled to a stop just inside the gate. Ten minutes later, they saw the Rover move slowly across the lawn and pull up in back of the Dawson house.

Let's head down, Janice. Maybe we can help out now. And I want to tell them what I saw earlier." They worked their way down the hill towards the runway.

They moved cautiously through the gate, thoughts of Adrian swooping down on them in the darkness always present in the back of their minds. But everything was quiet now. They could see figures moving around in the Dawson house, but no one seemed to be hurrying. It appeared as though the worst was over. On a sudden impulse, Ryan turned and headed toward the pool. "I'm pretty sure I saw Adrian by the pool earlier, Janice. Let's see if we can figure out what he was doing there." He hurried across the lawn.

They walked around the pool, but nothing seemed out of place. Ryan was disappointed. He was sure Adrian had been up to no good, but if he was it certainly wasn't evident now. "Let's go, Janice. I guess I was wrong."

"What's that, Ryan?" Janice pointed toward the diving board. He turned on his Elilight and squinted as the ultra-bright light reflected off the surface of the water and lit up the white tiles around the pool. "It looks like a...slipper! It's a girl's slipper, Ryan!"

He stepped up to the side of the pool and directed the beam downward. He gasped. "It's ..." He shoved the light at Janice, quickly stripped off his clothes and dove into the pool. He swam down through the flickering beam of light until he reached the bottom, then moved quickly over to the small body. It was Eli! Or Hannah! He could see the fairies on her pajamas, then with a start, saw that her arms were shackled behind her back and her ankles were shackled together. He stifled his outrage, grabbed her up against his chest with one arm and paddled furiously to the surface where Janice was waiting. She quickly grabbed her under the shoulders, pulled her up on the deck and rolled her over on her stomach.

By the time Ryan had climbed out of the pool, Janice had straddled her and was trying to force the water out of her lungs, but there was none. Together, they administered CPR for over 20 minutes, but she was completely unresponsive. And in spite of their efforts, Ryan knew it was no use. If Adrian did this, she had been there for a very long time. There was no chance she was still alive.

"Who is it, Janice! Do you know? Is it Eli or Hannah?" Exhausted, he slowly put his clothes on and slipped into his shoes.

"It's Hannah, Ryan," she said softly. "Those are her favorite pajamas. She told me..." she broke down in tears.

They held on to each other for a few minutes, then Ryan carefully picked Hannah up in his arms. He was surprised at how light she was. They walked together across the lawn and up the steps to

the Dawson home. Janice held Hannah's head up and absently worked the tangles out her wet hair as they walked. They paused at the door, then opened it quietly.

"Who is it, Rich?" Elaine peeked around the corner, careful not to disturb Eli.

He put his fingers to his lips and shook his head. "It's Ryan and Janice, Elaine. They just wanted to know if they could help..."

Elaine eased back down on the couch and put her arms around Eli, desperately keeping what she had just seen, away from her.

Richard motioned them up the stairs and followed quickly behind them. He ushered them into his room, took her from Ryan and laid her gently on their bed. "Go downstairs and send Mrs. Dawson up, but please, don't say anything to Eli. Can you do that?"

Ryan swallowed hard, and nodded. "She was at the bottom of the pool, Dr. Dawson. We tried CPR but..."

"Thank you Ryan," he said hoarsely. Janice pulled him gently out the door and closed it behind them.

Richard couldn't bear to look at her shackles. *Was she conscious when he put them on? Was she conscious when he threw her in the pool?* He grabbed the bolt-cutters out of his toolbox, carefully cut them off, then sat down beside her and held her hand in his. He was surprised at how warm it still was, but then he remembered. She had probably been in the heated pool for as much as three hours. But still, he couldn't get over how alive she looked. It was as though she were just sleeping. He leaned over and examined her fingers closely. Her skin wasn't even wrinkled.

Elaine opened the door quietly and kneeled next to the bed beside them. She kissed Hannah softly on the cheek, then gently turned her head to the side... "Rich! She's been bitten!"

He grimaced. "I was hoping she hadn't suffered, Elaine, but I guess that was too much to hope for."

"No! You don't understand! She's been bitten, and the marks are here to prove it. But they're almost healed!"

He dropped to his knees beside her. "You're right! But...that's impossible! Unless..." He sat up on the bed beside her and gently opened her eyes. As soon as he moved his hands away, they closed. "She's been in warm water for three hours, Elaine. If she were dead, rigor would have begun already, especially in her eyelids. She's not dead!"

He grabbed the stethoscope out of his bag, pressed it against her chest, and listened intently. There was nothing. "When Eli was hibernating, her heart beat only once every 10 minutes, Elaine. And she breathed about once every two hours." *But Hannah was in the water for three,*

he thought to himself. *Did she have to breathe every couple of hours? Would she die if she couldn't?*

As if on cue, Hannah breathed in softly; almost imperceptibly.

It was the sweetest sound he had ever heard.

Elaine rushed into Eli's room, grabbed a dry pair of pajamas, then a couple of towels out of the bathroom and rushed back to her side. She undressed her, dried her off thoroughly and redressed her in Eli's own fairy pajamas; the very ones Hannah had bought her in what seemed ages ago. She put a heavy blanket over her, kissed her on the forehead, and smiled at Rich. "Why don't you go get Eli, Rich? I think she deserves a bit of good news this morning. And Sava. And Jack...Oh what the hell! Get them all up here!"

Rich slipped out the door. Elaine absently adjusted Hannah's pillow, kissed her on the cheek and squeezed her hand. And waited.

She heard Eli scream, then heard her scrambling up the stairs. The door banged open and she threw herself across the room, wrapped her arms around Hannah, and pressed her cheek against hers. "Oh Hannah! I thought you were..."

"She's still asleep, Eli. She can't hear you."

Eli slid into bed beside her, and pulled the blanket up over them both, just as the door slowly opened again behind them.

"Did you call the Sandstrøms, Rich?" The others filed in quietly behind him.

"Right after I told Eli, Elaine." He grinned at her. Oskar was holding tightly to his arm, and Sava had his arm around his waist, steadying him.

"What's wrong with her, Dad?"

"You missed it all, Oskar. And it's just as well. Suffice it to say that Hannah has returned to us from the dead."

Jack kneeled down beside them and took both their hands in his. Hannah's was as warm as Eli's. "You're whole again, Eli," he whispered. *And so am I.*

Sava saw the bright glow on the horizon "I have to go now, Eli. Have Oskar let me know as soon as Hannah wakes, please."

"I will, Sava."

If there's nothing else we can do, Dr. Dawson, I think I'll head back...home." Ryan still couldn't get the horrible picture of Hannah lying motionless at the bottom of the pool out of his mind.

And in spite of their assurances, he still couldn't quite believe she was alive. He just couldn't wrap his mind around it yet.

"I'll come too, Ryan. I don't think you should go back alone." Janice put her arm around his waist.

They had just gotten down to the kitchen when the door opened suddenly and Nils and Livia rushed in.

"Ryan! How can we ever thank you? And Janice! If you hadn't found her when you did, who knows what might have happened?" Nils was still shaking.

"He's right, Ryan," Janice said. "If you hadn't thought to go look around the pool, she would be there still. You may have saved her life. Dr. Dawson said that even Eli breathed every two hours when she was hibernating."

Finally, the import of what he had done, in spite of the fact that he knew they had just been ... lucky, sank in.

Livia kissed him on the cheek, then rushed up the stairs after Nils.

Jason just stood in the open door staring at him, then broke into a wide grin. He rushed up to him and grabbed his hand. Ryan squeezed it hard, pulled him up against him and slapped him on the back. "I'm just glad she's going to be okay, Jason."

"God, Ryan! It looks like you got to the island just in time! You WERE a little late getting to the field the first time you helped us, you know," he kidded.

"That's because I didn't know you the first time, Jason. Now that I do, I figured your sister, at least, was worth saving."

"Just my sister? Thanks a lot!" he grinned at him.

"She's a lot nicer than you, Jason. And a lot prettier. No offence."

"Well, all I can say is...Thanks again. Both of you," he said hoarsely. He turned and headed up the stairs after his parents.

They walked slowly up the hill together. The sun was just coming up over Arrowhead island, and for the first time since he had arrived, he felt like they really belonged here. If he didn't miss his family and friends so much, it would be absolutely perfect. Perhaps, someday soon...

§

"Absolutely not! I want her with us, at home, until she wakes up," Livia insisted.

“But Mrs. Sandstrøm! Papa can look after her better here! And if she’s in my room, I can watch after her better myself. I’ve hibernated myself, you know. And I’ll stay with her all the time. She’ll never be alone.”

“All of you can come over anytime you wish,” Livia countered. “But she’s our daughter and she belongs at home with her family.”

“And I’ll be available whenever you wish, of course,” Richard assured her. “I’m only seconds away, Livia. Elaine and I are fine with whatever you decide.”

Oskar raised his hand timidly.

“Oskar, you don’t have to raise your hand,” Elaine smiled at him. “Did you have something to add?”

“Hannah was...bitten by Adrian, right? But she isn’t immune to the bite of a vampire any more. Does that mean...”

“My God, Richard! Is he right? Could she become...” Livia sat down on the edge of the bed.

“We simply don’t know, Livia. And because of the injection Sava gave her, we didn’t think it was worth taking the risk to re-inject her. And Jonathan still isn’t satisfied that we can safely give her the shot. We’re just going to have to wait and see.” He couldn’t believe they hadn’t thought of this when Elaine first saw the bite marks on her neck. But, he remembered, they had other things on their minds at the time.

“No one in your house has the strength to control her if the worst happens, Livia,” Elaine pointed out quickly. “Perhaps Eli is right. Maybe she should stay here, where one of us will always be available to...”

“Mom, I stayed with Eli when she was hibernating. I ... talked to her...infection...once, remember? Maybe I could do it again. That way, maybe we would be able to know ahead of time if she...”

“Okay, Oskar. She can stay.” Nils took Livia’s hand and looked at her questioningly. She nodded.

§

The dust had finally settled, and Eli was finally alone with Hannah. The Sandstrøms had stayed until after 10:00PM, and Sava had come by at dusk and been practically forced out the door at 10:30 by Elaine, who explained to him over and over again that Eli and Oskar needed their sleep, even if Hannah didn’t.

Eli lay in bed next to Hannah, holding her hands tightly in her own. She remembered when Papa told her they were so much alike that even their fingerprints matched. And ever since, the two of

them had spent a great deal of time trying to find any little thing that was different, to no avail. It had always made Hannah laugh with glee when they failed, but it had always made Eli a bit uncomfortable for reasons she could never discern. But still, she knew Papa was wrong.

Hannah was perfect. She, on the other hand, was flawed. Hannah had never lived in darkness, nor had she the resulting scars. She was still perfect.

But when she wakes up? Will she be me then? Adrian had effectively raped Hannah when he bit her. He had planted his seed in her and she would never be the same again. Eli shuddered. Adrian's child was now growing inside her, and would destroy Hannah just as Gudmund's father's seed had destroyed Eli. The truth of it had become clearer to her as she had begun to grow older. Her thoughts turned to Gudmund, her savior, who together with Sava, had tried in vain to make everything right again. But even he had known finally that he would only find his peace with his own death, because he knew his father's bastard child would die with him.

She felt Oskar slide in beside her. "Go away, Oskar. I don't want..."

"What, Eli? You don't want me to hear you beating yourself up again? Taking the blame for things that were always beyond your control?" He hated it when she thought about things this way. "Your 'child' is gone Eli. Papa destroyed it!"

"But look what I did at its bidding, Oskar! And poor Hannah! What do you suppose she'll do?" She tried to push him away, but this time he was stronger.

"We won't let her, Eli."

"But she'll want to. And that's all that matters!"

"No. She won't! Any more than you did. There's a big difference between 'wanting to' and 'having to.'"

"But it means I was weak!"

"You're a child. You're supposed to be weak."

"But I'm not, Oskar. I'm not a child anymore."

"No, I guess you're not--quite. But you were for over 200 years. And Hannah is still a child, in spite of everything."

"She...is, isn't she?" she smiled at him. And she finally realized THAT was the real difference between them she hadn't been able to put into words.

"And we'll protect her and keep her safe, Eli. I promise!"

"But what if Papa's cure won't work on her, Oskar?"

“Then we’ll deal with it! You’re an adult now, remember? And that’s what adults do.” he grinned at her.

“What if I don’t want to be an adult, Oskar?” She played with the buttons on his pajamas.

“Then you can be a child, Eli. And I’ll be...whatever you want me to be,” he whispered. He gently put his hand on her cheek.

“I love you so, Oskar.” She kissed him ever so softly on the lips.

And, ever so softly, Hannah breathed once, and was still.

Chapter 51: The Seed

It was the third day of Hannah's hibernation, and Richard was getting nervous. "She's not a vampire, Elaine. I don't think she'll be able to survive months of hibernation like Eli did. She'll die of starvation."

"We don't know what she's capable of, Rich. She's...unique."

"We know she's no stronger than Eli or Oskar," he retorted. "And Eli just barely survived herself with her full strength."

"That doesn't sound like a rigorous scientific observation to me, Rich. You're thinking with your heart now. Eli could have hibernated another month or two safely. Believe me, I know."

He wasn't about to argue with her about a vampire's limitations. "But we don't know HER limits, Elaine. I think enough time has passed now. We need to let Oskar try to talk to her, or at least to her...other."

"I agree, Rich." *If the change has occurred, it would be complete by now*, she thought, although even Elaine had never experienced a situation where a vampire had begun hibernation at the same time it had been infected. In Hannah's unique case, she might have begun hibernating even before she was infected, depending on when Adrian strangled her. Who could know how that combination of events would play out?

"Really, Papa? Can he try tonight?" Eli stood up excitedly.

"Yes, Eli. Let him know, please. And if he has any second thoughts, tell him he doesn't have to do it. We can wait."

"He'll want to, Papa." She rushed up the stairs.

§

Oskar sat at his computer trying to do his homework, but his thoughts kept returning to Hannah. It had been almost impossible for him to concentrate for days now. He wanted desperately to try to talk to her but Mom and Dad had been reluctant to allow it yet.

He peeked at her over the top of his screen. She was lying on her back, arms at her sides, just as Eli had last left her. *She's been on her back long enough*, he thought to himself. He went over to the bed and gently turned her over on her left side, bent her left arm and placed her hand under her pillow. *There! That's more like it.* He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Papa says it's okay, Oskar! You can try tonight," Eli whispered. She kneeled down beside him and stroked Hannah's hair.

"Really?"

“Yep! But I want to give her a bath first, Oskar. You know, like you did when I was hibernating?”

He smiled at her. “Okay, Eli. But you have to let me dry her hair. Okay?”

“It’s a deal.” They picked her up carefully. Eli cradled her head in her hands and together they carried her into the bathroom.

Oskar filled the tub, carefully checked the water temperature, then closed the door softly behind him on the way out.

He sat on the edge of their bed, towel in his lap and Hannah’s brush in his hand. And waited.

§

“Can you hear anything, Oskar?”

“Eli, you have to leave me alone! It took a long time with you. And it was the middle of the night before I saw...” his voice trailed off.

“I’m sorry, Oskar. What do you want me to do?”

“Stop talking, Eli. And just...hope there’s nothing there for me to find. Except Hannah.”

She put her arms around him, hugged him for a moment, then lay on her back beside him, hands behind her head, admittedly exhausted after everything that had happened.

Oskar rolled over and took Hannah in his arms, pressed his cheek against hers, and waited quietly.

They were both asleep almost instantly.

§

His eyes popped open. *Damn! I can’t believe I fell asleep!* He glanced over at the clock: 4:00AM. He could hear Eli breathing quietly beside him. She was still sound asleep. Hannah’s cheek was still pressed against his, but he had lost all feeling in his trapped arm. He gingerly slid it out from under her, grimaced when it began tingling, and shook it out. He gently turned her over, climbed over her and snuggled up against her from the other side.

Hannah? Are you there? He called to her over and over again in the darkness and listened intently. Nothing. He tried again, but then remembered how long he had tried with Eli without success, and sighed to himself, realizing they might be in this for the long haul. *But she’s not Eli. She’s never hibernated before.* And this time wasn’t a normal hibernation anyway. *Hibernation is probably a life-saving mechanism for her, rather than a part of her life-cycle.* He thought

about all the science that Dad had developed around Eli's former condition and all the talks they had about it when they were home-schooled, and it just sounded right to him. And besides, he realized, Hannah had his psychic abilities also; and even stronger. Eli hadn't. Wouldn't that make talking to her easier? *Or more dangerous*, he thought to himself.

He took a deep breath and with new determination, tried even harder. This time he felt something moving in a new darkness, a familiar three-dimensional darkness he had seen only once before, with Eli. He took a deep breath, hoping it didn't mean what it had meant that time. *Hannah? Is that you? Hannah?*

He suddenly felt himself falling into that darkness, but he caught himself and with a powerful thrust of his wings, soared up over the house and flew south toward London. But something was wrong. He was holding a red rose tightly in his hands and he realized suddenly that his wings were...growing out of his back! And they were too small and frail. He knew instinctively that they couldn't support his weight. And sure enough; he felt himself beginning to fall. He flapped his wings fiercely, but it was no use. He fell like a rock, head over heels toward the ground. He recognized the Shaw house, caught a glimpse of Mrs. Shaw through the kitchen window, then felt the sharp branches tearing at his flesh as he slammed into the wall beneath her.

He opened his eyes. He was sitting on a bench at Vista Point. There was a clear velvety-black sky and a full moon, so bright he could see his shadow. From there, with his new eyes, he could see Phoenix Park, and was startled to see what appeared to be a small figure sitting at the base of the sculpture. He got to his feet, brushed off the leaves and twigs still clinging to his clothes, and walked slowly down the hill to White Road. He turned right up the hill toward the ridge, and picked up his pace when he saw the wisps of fog just beginning to peek over the edge; he was determined to reach the park before it. He was intensely curious now as to who might be up there alone at night, and why.

Just as he turned down the narrow path to the park, there was a gentle gust of wind, and the fog, freshly energized, rose up just a bit, wrapped itself carefully around his ankles, and poured gently past him toward the valley. He felt vertigo as the stable ground on which he had been standing was rapidly transformed into an ocean of rapidly moving fog, undulating slowly up and down in waves never higher than his knees, and stretching off to the south as far as he could see, vast and white, brilliantly illuminated by the ghostly blue-white light of the moon. To the north, it poured gently into the black abyss of the valley. The sudden irrational fear of being swept off the ridge into the darkness made him lose his balance. He stumbled, caught himself, took a couple of halting steps, then stood there motionless, trying to get his bearings again. His eyes fixed on the Phoenix, which for a magical moment, appeared to be in flight over the rapidly-moving fog.

And there she was, sitting casually on one of its huge talons, one arm around its scaly leg. And oddly, she was wearing Eli's fairy pajamas, just as she really was as she lay next to them in Eli's bed.

"You're funny, Oskar!" she giggled. "I thought you were going to fall flat on your face!"

"Hannah! What are you doing here?"

“Waiting for you, Oskar. I just knew you’d come for me.”

“But, why didn’t you just come home? You know the way.”

There is no ‘home’ Oskar. Can’t you see?”

He turned and looked. The valley he had just left, previously aglow with amber street lamps and scores of porch lights, was dark and quiet. Without being able to see, he suddenly knew the compound was no longer there either.

“I looked, Oskar, but nothing’s here; not even the lighthouse. Only...this.” She put both arms around the leg of the Phoenix and clung tightly to it.

Oskar sat down beside her and put his arm around her. She let go of the Phoenix and grabbed him tightly in her arms. “I was afraid I’d never see you again,” she whispered. “I’ve been here alone for weeks, and the sun hasn’t come up once, and the moon stays in the same place, and the stars...” she buried her face in his chest.

“But Hannah. What about Adrian? Do you remember? He bit you! He infected you! Why aren’t you...?”

“It died, Oskar.” The tears welled up in her eyes. “I picked it up, it got dark and ugly and disgusting, and then it died. And it burned up in the moonlight. And I was alone again.”

“What, Hannah? What died?”

“The child, Oskar. Adrian’s child. It was so beautiful and it had that sweet baby smell, and I just had to pick it up. But it changed when I kissed it on the cheek.”

“But...where is it, Hannah?”

“There!” She pointed at the fog as it swirled silently around the base of the sculpture.

But whose...?” He realized, then, he didn’t want to ask her, because he wasn’t sure what it would mean if she answered, ‘mine.’

“I don’t know, Oskar! But it was so pretty lying there, I just had to pick it up. And then...”

“You...killed it just by kissing it?”

“Yes! No! I don’t know, Oskar.”

They sat there quietly together until Hannah finally stopped crying. Oskar rocked her gently in his arms, showering her with sweet thoughts of Eli, and Einstein, and Jack, and reminded her how she got her fairy cup that night when Eli’s Papa presented it to her and shared with her the

story of his great loss. And how he told her on another very different night that there wasn't a single boy in the whole world who was worthy of her.

"Let's go home, Hannah," he said quietly. He stood up and took her hands in his.

She put her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and pressed her cheek against his. "Carry me, Oskar," she whispered.

He walked slowly down what he guessed was the path, using the tops of the trees in the distance to guide him. He could feel the pavement beneath his feet and concentrated on its firmness and stability, trying not to let the relentless flow of the fog into the valley distract him. "The path is here, Hannah. I can feel it. All we have to do is follow it home."

She kissed him on the neck and held him tighter. But she knew that, before the fog, there had been no path at all.

He slowed down in the area where he thought the path met the road, and felt ahead carefully with his foot. After several attempts, he felt the familiar rounded shape of the curb, smiled to himself and turned left into the valley. The fog hadn't made much headway, in spite of the fact that it continued to pour over the ridge and downward, hugging the hillside. It petered out no more than 100 meters down the hill. When they passed below it and reached the sharp turn in the road, the lights of the village haltingly winked alive again, *just like the neon sign over the old theatre marquis*, he thought to himself. He breathed a sigh of relief. "See how easy that was, Hannah?"

She lowered herself to the ground, and took Oskar's hand firmly in hers. "Oskar I...thank you, Oskar. She squeezed his arm, and they started down White road together. "Look Oskar! The school is rebuilt."

"Yeah, it seems so Hannah. At least in your world. And it looks like..." he craned his neck, then did a double-take. "There's an observatory now, Hannah. Is that real?! Will there really be a telescope in the school?"

She smiled. "It seems so, Oskar," she mimicked him, teasingly. She probed even further into the future, desperately looking for something wonderful just for Oskar. She simply had to do it. She closed her eyes a moment, straining to see...*Yes! It's there!* She smiled at him, then pointed toward the meadow high up the hill on the north side of the forest, just visible from where they were standing; the meadow where He and Eli had stood that day before the flight of the Phoenix, looking down on the compound and planning their future together. "What's that, Oskar? I don't remember that being there...before." She gave him one of Eli's beautiful pixie grins.

He could just make out a low, white, three-rail fence, and a lot of big brightly-lit windows right near the edge of the meadow, casting a warm friendly glow down the steep hill. "I don't know, Hannah. But there can't be anything there! That's where Eli wanted to build our house..."

Her grin was now ear-to-ear. "You're welcome Oskar. It's the least I could do." The lights in the meadow winked out suddenly. And Hannah's short trip into Oskar's future was over.

Oskar took her in his arms and squeezed her tight. “You are ...amazing, Hannah. I just don’t know what to say to you anymore.”

“Let’s go home, Oskar.” They walked silently, hand-in-hand, down White Road and finally along the low seawall toward home. No hurry. It was as though they had all the time in the world.

§

He opened his eyes. He could see the pink sky through Eli’s window. He still had his arms around Hannah, and his cheek was still pressed against hers, but she hadn’t moved a muscle. He sighed to himself. *I...hope it was real. I hope it was real. I hope it was real.*

“What, Oskar? What do you hope was real?” Eli propped herself up on one arm.

“Oh, Eli! I had the most magical dream. First I flew with Hannah and crashed into the Shaw’s house, then I walked up to Phoenix Park through the most beautiful fog, and found Hannah sitting on the sculpture. And she was wearing your pajamas.”

“Was she...did she...”

“No. She was Hannah. Nothing else. And she was lost. So I brought her home. And she showed me beautiful things, Eli.” He paused. “She’s Hannah, Eli; and only Hannah. I’m sure of it. Adrian’s child is dead. It died in Hannah’s arms.”

Eli understood immediately what that meant. She gently shook Hannah’s shoulder. “But she’s still hibernating, Oskar. Why is she still hibernating?”

“I don’t know, Eli. Let me try...” He shook her gently, then poked her a bit harder in the ribs.

Nothing.

“Maybe it was just a dream, Oskar.”

“NO! It wasn’t!”

“I’m sorry, Oskar. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I was so certain, Eli! We walked down the hill together and we could see the house ahead of us clearly just before I woke up.”

“I know, Oskar. Let’s...” They gently rolled her over on her back, lay down next to her again and pulled her arms up around them. They lay there quietly next to her until the pink sky turned blue and the smell of bacon cooking wafted up the stairs.

“Mama’s up,” Eli whispered. “And Papa too.” She could hear the soft sounds of their voices through the open window.

“Eli, Hannah’s breathing.” He spoke so softly, she could scarcely hear him.

And so she was. And at the same time, Eli knew she had been breathing for a while now; she just hadn’t realized it, because waking up in the mornings with Hannah beside them was such a natural thing for them.

§

“They’re still asleep, Rich. I peeked in before I came downstairs.” Elaine turned the bacon and adjusted the burner.

He shrugged his shoulders, resignedly. “I suppose it was too much to hope for. It’s only the first night he tried, after all. I’m just afraid, because we have no idea what’s going on inside her head. You and Eli were predictable in these matters; Hannah isn’t.”

Elaine smiled when she noticed that he had put Hannah’s cup on the table this morning. “Rich, every time I’ve convinced myself that you’re a scientist through and through, you do something like that.” She nodded at the cup.

He blushed. “I’m sorry, Elaine. It’s just that...” he grinned sheepishly, and set the teapot on the table.

“It’s one of the things I love most about you.” She kissed him on the cheek, then took the last of the bacon out of the pan and put it on the strainer.

“Should I go get them?”

“No. Let them sleep a while longer. Besides, it’ll give us time to talk.” She poured him a cup of tea, and put the now-drained bacon in the oven to keep it warm. She sat down beside him.

“Richard, I’m really worried about Eli. I don’t think she can take much more of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at what she’s been through since the three of you first found each other. She killed the chief detective in Karlstad after he shot Oskar; Oskar almost killed Seth after he threw a rock through her window, almost killing her; she was almost killed again by the Other One—once when she was alone, and again when the three of you went after him.”

“But look at what she got in return, Elaine. You.”

She smiled at him. “Let me finish, Rich. After that, Gudmund came into our lives, and after endearing himself to her, committed suicide.”

“But he gave her Hannah, Elaine.”

She sighed. “Richard, please let me finish! You’re completely missing the point. Even Hannah’s introduction into the equation wasn’t without problems. Remember the boys who almost raped them? After that came The Four. I know; it wasn’t anyone’s fault. It just happened. But that whole episode took its toll on her too. They invaded our home, and I almost died before her eyes! Rich, she’s still just a child!”

She caught her breath and started again. “Then there was the island, and I thought; ‘Now at last her life will settle down and she can have the chance to be really happy.’ Then there was Marcus. And she was almost killed again. And Oskar! Again, right before her eyes. And that wasn’t the end of it. The BbC got involved, she suffered through the kidnapping of both you and Oskar, in which Oskar almost died again, and then her latest adversary, Adrian, took it upon himself to make her life even more miserable, and the island and everyone she loved might have disappeared in a flash of light. And now this! For way too many long hours, she was absolutely positive that Hannah, her soul mate and blood sister, was dead at Adrian’s hands. I can’t even imagine how all this has affected her, Rich. There’s a big difference between living alone for over 200 years living off the blood of strangers, and living for only 16 more, during which almost everyone she has taken into her heart has nearly lost their lives; primarily because of her and her very existence in this world.”

“But that’s not true, Elaine. None of it is her fault.”

“Eli doesn’t see it that way, Rich. I’m certain of it.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong. I think Eli is happier now than she’s ever been. And Hannah is going to be back with us in no time. I’m certain of it.”

“That’s because you’ve always looked at the upside of everything, Rich! The odds are stacked heavily against us with Hannah. You must know that! Even though she’s alive, she could have sustained brain damage from lack of oxygen. She might never wake up. Why would she have hibernated in the first place? Vampires don’t hibernate when they’re attacked and almost killed; and humans certainly don’t. There’s simply no evolutionary precedent, at least in Vampire DNA, to account for what’s happened to her! She can’t just conjure up these abilities as she needs them. You need to be more realistic,” She scolded.

“That’s your job, Elaine. And you do it quite well, I might add.” He winked at her. “I think they’ve slept long enough. I’ll go upstairs and...”

Elaine glanced up as the two of them came around the corner “There you are! It’s about time! Come in, sit down and have some breakfast.” Elaine got out the eggs. “How’s Hannah?”

They sat down at the table, but Richard could tell there was something off. “What’s wrong Eli? You look so serious. Has something happened to Hannah?”

“No, she’s fine,” she said stoically.

“Oskar? What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Dad.” They grinned at each other.

“I know what it is! I’m sitting in the wrong seat!” she slid over, picked up the teapot and filled up Hannah’s fairy cup.

“Eli, what on earth are you doing?” Elaine didn’t need this right now. In fact, she couldn’t believe Eli would actually do something so flip.

“Nothing, Mama! I just got here. Sorry I’m late.” Eli peaked around the corner, grinned, and sat down next to Oskar.

Elaine’s teacup shattered on the floor. She crouched down and started to pick up the pieces, but her hands were shaking. She just couldn’t do it. Finally, she burst into tears.

“Mama! I’m sorry! We didn’t mean to upset you.” Eli was next to her in a flash. Hannah sat there, dumfounded, mouth wide open.

“I’m not upset, Eli. I’m...” she choked up.

“Mrs. Dawson, I never would have done it if I had thought...and now I’ve made you break your teacup!” Hannah started to get up, but it was too late.

“Welcome back Hannah!” Richard lifted her out of her chair and hugged her. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon!”

Eli helped Mama to her feet and threw the remains of her cup in the garbage. “I’m sorry! I’m really...”

“Stop, Eli. There’s nothing to be sorry about. I’m just happy, that’s all.” She wiped her tears away, and kissed Hannah on the cheek. “Welcome back, Hannah,” she whispered. “I...I honestly didn’t think we’d ever see you again.”

“Poor Elaine! Always expecting the worst and never prepared for the best!” Richard put his arm around her. “Oskar! Have you told her parents? Jack? Sava?” He hated to think that they might not know yet.

“Yes, Dad. I told them all when we were coming down the stairs.”

“Then, I suppose we’d better get ready for them, Elaine.” He put a few more chairs around the table, filled the kettle with water, and put it on the stove.

Chapter 52: Einstein spills the beans

“Where’s Jack?” Hannah whispered.

Eli looked puzzled. “Why are you asking me? Can’t you see him?” The three of them moved quietly into the living room, away from the crowd of people filling the kitchen. Almost everyone else was there now; Jonathan, the Sandstrøms, Ryan and Janice, and Henry. And they were all talking at once.

“I’m not looking, Eli. I told him I wouldn’t...”

“No. You didn’t. You only promised him you wouldn’t intrude on his thoughts. You don’t have to do that to know where he is. And you know that!”

“He’s coming, Hannah,” Oskar reassured her. “With his mom.”

“But...why isn’t he here already?” Everyone was here but Jack. Even Henry was here. But still, she resisted the urge to reach out to him.

Oskar looked at Eli. She put her finger to her lips.

“Jack! It’s about time you got here! She’s in the living room I think. With Oskar and Eli.” Henry peaked around the corner and winked at Hannah. “Mom! Have some tea!” He put a cup in Maggie’s hand and pulled out a chair for her. “Hannah will be back in in a second. In the meantime, sit with us. I’m not sure you’ve heard the whole story of Hannah’s rescue from the pool.”

Jack sat on the couch, took Hannah’s hands in his and gently pulled her down beside him. Hannah was startled to see his eyes were red. “We were so worried about you, Hannah. Are you sure you’re alright? You’ve been through so much – more than someone your age should ever have to go through.” His eyes searched hers.

And finally, despite her resolve, she reached out to him. But she was afraid. Not of this Jack, but of what she had seen in the darkness after Oskar had gone on ahead of her. In those brief minutes before she returned to reality and felt the two of them lying next to her in bed, something – some subtle change in her shadow on White Road or some slight sound, or some odd change she sensed in the direction of the flow of time, caused her to turn around and look back at the now-distant meadow, where Eli’s and Oskar’s home would stand in the future. And she had seen...something else; something that she couldn’t understand; something unimaginable to her, yet as real as Jack was now. And it had frightened her terribly.

“Oh, Jack! I’m so sorry I made a mess of things! If I hadn’t gone out alone at night, this never would have happened.”

He pressed his fingers against her lips gently. “Shhh! Do you really want to ruin the moment by trying to heap blame on yourself? I don’t want to hear any more of this nonsense. You’re alive and intact, along with all your adorable flaws. That’s all that matters now.”

She pressed her face against his chest and put her arms around him, and when he reached up and began gently rubbing her ears, all her doubts and reservations vanished in an instant. And he kissed her on the forehead as her ears responded to his touch and grew once again to their full pixie glory, and her fear of the future dissolved away in the warm comfort of the present.

§

“I really want to do this, Mom! Can I?” Hannah pleaded.

“You really haven’t cooked for so many people before, Hannah. Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Eli will help me, won’t you Eli?”

“Sure! I can make the dessert. That is if everyone likes cookies,” she grinned.

Livia sighed, “That’s hardly encouraging. But go ahead. We have everything you need; I saw to it. But I recommend you get started right away. You only have 7 hours till dinner, you know,” she teased. She beat a hasty retreat from the kitchen and the clattering of pots and pans as the two of them got down to business. Nils winked at her. They headed out the back door to the Dawson’s house, where Elaine and Richard were waiting for them on the porch loungers.

“I’m going to make Mom’s famous spaghetti, Eli. It’s what we have whenever the whole family gets together, except at Christmas of course. And it’s so easy!” She turned on the burner and threw two two-pound packages of ground beef in the pot.

“Don’t you think you should break that up before you start cooking it,” Eli suggested.

“Otherwise you’re going to be left with two giant hamburger patties.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Hannah grabbed a wooden spoon and began breaking up the huge mass of meat, which was already beginning to sizzle in the pot.

Eli waved the rising fumes away, then reached up and turned on the vent fan.

“Thanks, Eli. I always forget that.” Hannah dug away furiously at the now partially cooked mass, until it gradually yielded to her efforts and became mostly a huge pile of pebbly chunks of browned meat. She scooped up a fair-sized chunk of the remaining mass, peeked to make sure her mom and dad were safely away, then slipped it quietly into the dog bowl, where it was immediately given Einstein’s full attention.

“Help me with the cans, Eli.” She handed Eli a can opener and tackled her own stack of cans with another.

“This one too?” Eli held up a can of green beans.

“No, no. Just the tomatoes and tomato paste. Sorry!” she put the beans back on the pantry shelf and grabbed another can of tomatoes. She emptied all the cans into the pot then tossed them one by one into the garbage, but not before pouring the last little bit of each into Einstein’s bowl.

“Hadn’t you better stir that? It’s going to burn if you don’t.” Eli reached for the spoon, but Hannah grabbed it away from her and began stirring vigorously.

“I’ll do it Eli. Why don’t you grate the cheese?” With her other hand, she passed her a grater and a big chunk of parmesan cheese. “Get a bowl off the second shelf there.” She pointed with the spoon. “Oh, sorry!”

Eli wiped her face off with a towel. “It’s okay, Hannah.” She licked her lips. “But it tastes rather bland.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.” she grabbed a small plate off the counter and brushed the contents into the huge pot. “Mom measured out all the spices ahead of time, to make it easier for me. I don’t think she trusts me yet.” She grinned.

“I can’t imagine why,” Eli said, under her breath. She searched the lower cupboard, pulled out the mixer and a large bowl, and began preparing the cookie dough.

“Why don’t you add a couple of big spoonfuls of peanut butter to the mix, Eli? It makes the cookies a bit softer and they taste so much more peanutbuttery that way. Here, let me...” she grabbed the peanut butter out of the refrigerator and handed it to Eli. “Just two now; any more, and the cookies get kind of...soggy.”

“I remember, Hannah. But Mrs. Shaw told me three were better.” Eli quietly moved her bowl toward the end of the counter, away from Hannah’s self-regulating chaos.

“The bread! I almost forgot the bread!” Hannah grabbed two loaves of French bread off the top of the refrigerator, then mixed a stick of butter and some powdered garlic together in a bowl. “Garlic butter,” she explained to Eli. “We slice the bread, butter it on both sides, then put it back together, wrap it in foil, put it in the oven a bit before dinner, and voilà! Hot garlic bread!”

Eli smiled at her and stepped back a bit more when Hannah pulled out the huge bread knife and began hacking away at the bread. “I think you’d better slice it before you put it on the foil, Hannah. Otherwise, you’ll cut up the foil and all the melted butter will drip in the oven.”

“You’re absolutely right, Eli. I forgot. Mom always does it the way you said, and I never thought about why.” She crumpled up the now-mangled sheet of foil and tossed it in the garbage.

Hannah made short work of the loaves, wrapped them up neatly, and put them in the refrigerator. “I think I’m getting the hang of this, Eli. I don’t know why Mom thinks I couldn’t do it.”

“Hannah! Your pot is about to boil over!” Eli turned off the burner and pulled the pot to the side just in time. The thick, boiling sauce rose steadily to the top, but stopped just short of pouring over the edge. Hannah breathed a sigh of relief, then began stirring it again.

“Eli, there’s something stuck to the bottom of the pan. What does that mean?”

“Don’t touch it, Hannah!” She grabbed the spoon out of her hand, got out another pot, and together they carefully poured the first one into it. “Look there! You’ve burned it because you didn’t stir it often enough.” She pointed to the charred mass just becoming visible on the bottom of the pan.

“I’ve ruined it Eli! How am I going to tell Mom? And what are we going to do for dinner?”

“No Hannah, it’ll be fine. I didn’t let any of the burned part get into the new pot. You can hardly taste it at all. See?” she offered her a spoonful.

“You’re right, Eli. I can just barely tell. Maybe I’ll add some more spices to cover it up. Let’s see what we have...” she rummaged around in the spice cabinet. “This smells really good, Eli. What do you think?”

“Perfect! Why don’t you put a little of that in?”

“And this, Eli! What about this one?”

“Wow! That’ll do it, Hannah.” She looked at the bottle. It’s Anise. It’s pretty strong.”

Hannah dumped about half the bottle into the pot and stirred it vigorously.

“Let me try it, Hannah.” Eli blew on the spoon, then closed her eyes and tasted it carefully. “Perfect! But I’ve always loved Anise. What do you think?” she held out the spoon for her.

“I like it, Eli. It’s kind of...different. I think everyone will be pleasantly surprised.” She turned the burner down and put the lid on the pot. “Mom lets it simmer for an hour or so. She says it brings the flavor out. Here! Let me help you with the cookies now.” She grabbed two large cookie pans out of the cupboard.

§

“I don’t think I like what I’m smelling, Elaine.” Livia stood up, sniffing the air. “She’s burned it.”

“Well, then; I guess we’d better go straight to plan ‘B’ shouldn’t we?” The two of them got up and headed for the Dawson kitchen.

“Just in case, Rich. We won’t say anything if theirs turns out okay. I’ll just freeze it and use it later.” She winked at him.

“Well, Richard, it’s a good thing Elaine thought to get backup ingredients isn’t it?”

“I told you she was perfect, Nils. Now do you believe me?”

“Not quite perfect, Richard. After all, it IS Livia’s recipe.” Nils sniffed the air. “Or at least it was Livia’s recipe. Do I smell Anise?”

“Yes, indeed!” Richard grinned. “This is starting to get interesting.” But he knew the day would end well anyway. There were always Eli’s famous peanut butter cookies to look forward to...

§

“Okay, Eli. It’s done!” she gave the sauce a final stir, grabbed the pot off the stove and set it on the counter. “Now we just let it sort of steep for a while, then heat it up again before dinner.” She put the lid on it.

“You should have put the lid on before you moved it, Hannah.” Eli hurried to wipe up the trail of sauce on the floor, but Einstein beat her to it. Eli grabbed him around the neck and gave him a big hug. “You’re such a big help, Einstein. Oskar and I need to get a dog, Hannah.”

“You can borrow him whenever you want, Eli; especially for kitchen duty. And you know if you have any cookie dough left over, he’ll be happy to dispose of it for you.”

Eli laughed, “He’d have to fight Oskar and Papa for it, Hannah.” Eli covered her bowl with foil and put it on the counter next to the spaghetti sauce.

“Now we have time to go swimming with Oskar and Jason. And Ryan and Janice! And Anne, Allan and Sara! See how easy it all was?” They rushed upstairs, put on their suits, and headed across the lawn toward the pool.

“Make sure you’re back in time to set the table, Hannah,” Livia shouted after her. “And don’t forget the...”

“We know what we’re doing, Mom. Everything’s ready to go. Don’t worry about a thing!”

§

Livia sniffed the pot again, and wrinkled her nose. “What should we do, Elaine? Perhaps we should swap ours for hers.”

“They’d know right away, Livia. And Hannah would feel insulted. I think we’d best leave things as they are.” She put the lid back on the pot. “We’ll just have to grin and bear it, I suppose. But I have to admit, I’m sort of looking forward to seeing what everyone else thinks of their ‘innovations.’”

“Okay, then. It’s decided. We’d better get out of here before they get back.”

Mom, you can’t do that to her! She’ll be humiliated!

Oskar? You know the rules. You and Hannah are not allowed to eavesdrop.

I know, Mom. I’m sorry! Hannah doesn’t know. But you can’t...

It’s not that bad, Oskar. Have a little faith. Elaine smiled to herself. She knew she was the last one who should be lecturing Oskar on such things, given her track record. *But now that I’ve got you, you might remind them that they still have to cook the spaghetti, drain it, put the bread in the oven and re-heat the sauce. They should probably head back soon.*

Oskar really didn’t want to move. The warm sun felt so good on his skin and he felt so content, with Eli lying next him, eyes closed, looking so absolutely beautiful. He had been watching her now for a while, thinking about how perfect she was, and how much she meant to him, and how madly in love with her he was. And how empty his life had been before she became a part of it. And the sounds of laughter surrounding them, the smell of the clean fresh water, the deep blue sky of a perfectly cloudless day, and the beautiful velvety green hills rising up in the distance, all made the moment even more perfect.

He reached over and softly caressed her face. She opened her eyes and smiled at him. He smiled back. *Your eyes are so blue!*

They’re always blue, Oskar. She put her hand over his. *Sometimes he’s so adorable,* she thought to herself.

No, they’re especially blue today.

She gently pulled him up against her and kissed him. *And you’re so very pretty today, Oskar,* she teased.

Her skin felt so soft and warm against his, he could hardly stand it. He grabbed her in a bear hug buried his face in her hair, and squeezed her tight. She felt so...good!

Sara giggled. “Eli kissed Oskar, Anne! Eli kissed Oskar, and he kissed her back!”

Oskar jumped up and grabbed for her. “And if you don’t watch out, I’ll kiss you too!”

Sara shrieked, then scrambled away from him still giggling, but she was too late; Oskar had her. He flopped her down on the grass, blew on her tummy, then planted a big wet kiss on her cheek.

“Eeewww!” she wiped away at it vigorously, but it was no use. He planted another one on her other cheek. “No, no, no, no, no!” her arms flailed about wildly, then she wriggled out of his grasp and leaped into the pool.

“You’re just lucky I can’t swim,” he hollered after her.

“Fibber! You can so! I’ve seen you,” she taunted.

Oskar scratched his head. “I can?! Well then...” he leaped into the pool after her.

She shrieked again and paddled furiously away from him.

“Get her, Oskar!” Allan yelled.

Oskar grabbed her foot, but she snatched it away, pulled herself up on the deck, stuck her tongue out at him and raced toward the loungers.

“Sara! Don’t run! How many times do I have to tell you...” Sara slid in beside her dad and pulled his arms around her. “Don’t let him get me, Daddy,” she giggled.

“I can’t get you now, Sara. You’re on home base. Those are the rules.” Oskar grinned at her. “But there’s always next time...” He grabbed his towel and walked slowly around the pool to where Eli was waiting patiently.

She put her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. “You’re nice and cool now, Oskar.”

“You’re still nice and warm!” he kissed her again.

“We’d probably better get back, Eli.” Hannah picked up her towel and bag.

“Yeah, I forgot. Mom told me to tell you, you both still have a lot to do and had better head back.”

“How could you forget to tell us something like that, Oskar,” Hannah grouched.

Oskar just smiled and kissed Eli on the cheek. *It’s all your fault – for just lying there all...beautiful like that.*

Eli blushed in spite of herself. “We’d better get going, Hannah.”

“Need any help?” He didn’t really want to, but then again when he thought about it a bit...

“No thanks, Oskar. We’ve got it all under control.”

“I just thought you might still be weak, Hannah. After all it’s only been five days since you woke up.”

“I’m fine, Oskar,” she glowered at him. She took Eli firmly by the hand and dragged her toward the house.

“Oskar is so sweet, Eli. You’re so lucky.”

“You really think so, Hannah?” *Actually, Hannah is more right than she knows*, she thought to herself. *If it weren’t for Oskar...* she shuddered at the thought, remembering for the first time in a long while, what Gudmund had told her about The Other One and their almost certain dark future together if Oskar hadn’t become part of her life.

“I really do, Eli. He’s perfect, except for some of those awful video games he’s been playing with Jason lately. What is it with boys anyway? The bloodier the game, the more they like it.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t let him play them on my computer—or on his own, when I’m around. The awful noises are bad enough.” She shuddered.

Hannah held the back door open for her, making sure that Einstein came in too. She still had a few treats for him. She knew how much he liked to chew up the crunchy uncooked spaghetti.

She got out another pot, filled it with water, and after spilling a bit along the way, put it on the stove. She made sure Eli saw her turn on the vent fan this time.

Eli sighed, then reached for the towel. What happened next was the subject of heated debate around the dinner table for a very long time to come, and marked the beginning of the legend of the “Sauce with Three Lives.”

Hannah grabbed the heavy pot of sauce off the counter, moved to the side to avoid tripping over Eli who was, at that moment, on the floor wiping up the spill, and stepped squarely on Einstein’s tail. He yelped, jerked his tail out from under her foot, thereby throwing her off balance, at which point she threw her arms out to keep from falling, then watched helplessly as, almost as if in slow-motion, the entire pot of warm spaghetti sauce turned completely over in the air once without spilling a single drop, then landed hard on its side in front of the refrigerator. The lid popped off, caromed off the refrigerator door and rolled to a stop under the dining room table, where it remained, unnoticed, until well after dinner was over. The sauce, unleashed at last, exploded out of the now oval-shaped pot, splattered against the refrigerator door and rebounded back across the kitchen, spattering the floor, the wall, and the improbably, even impossibly, identical twin soulmates from head to toe with the anise-laden, almost imperceptibly burned, but otherwise perfect family recipe.

Einstein, of course, thought he had just died and gone to heaven. So many times in the past had he fantasized about just this sort of thing—indeed in his experience, this single, beautiful dream made up for a hundred nightmares in which he was running from some dark evil force until Hannah, irritated by his scrambling feet, had waked him and saved him from a fate worse than death itself. And so, after waiting in vain all those years under the table through countless family gatherings, he joyfully began fulfilling his greatest fantasy. He ate.

And he ate. And he ate some more.

Eli and Hannah watched, fascinated, as Einstein proceeded to purposefully and with the greatest enthusiasm, devour the entire gigantic pot of sauce, without pause. And when he was finished and sat back proudly on his haunches, they both spontaneously applauded.

“Hannah, that was simply...awesome! Where did he put it all?”

“I don’t know, Eli.” She rubbed his stomach. “It doesn’t even show!”

The cold, hard reality of what had happened suddenly dawned on her. “But now what am I going to do? He ate our whole dinner!”

“He did, didn’t he?!” Eli couldn’t help herself. In spite of Hannah’s growing panic, all she could see was the smug look on Einstein’s sauce-covered face. She burst out laughing.

“But Eli...” she stood up, a forlorn look on her face, and turned around slowly, surveying the destruction, then suddenly stopped short. “Look, Eli!” she pointed at the wall.

There, in all its glory was a clearly-defined snapshot, outlined in spaghetti sauce, of their silhouettes, frozen in time at the exact moment of the catastrophe; Eli, crouched on the floor with the clear outline of the towel in her hand; and Hannah, balanced precariously on one foot, hands outstretched, and hair swirling around her face.

That did it. Hannah grabbed Eli’s hands and they both dissolved in laughter.

As fate would have it, at that exact moment Elaine and Livia rushed through the kitchen door. “Hannah! What on earth...” All Livia could see was the destroyed pot, a sauce-faced Einstein, and the total mess they had made of the kitchen.

All Elaine could see, with the aid of her wondrous vampire eyes, was the new mural on the wall – the one picture that was truly worth a thousand words – and her own Butterfly and her soulmate, laughing hysterically. “Rich,” she shouted, “Get the camera!”

§

After much anguish and soul-searching, Hannah had agreed to use Eli’s Mama’s sauce in place of her own, and at Livia’s insistence, keep what had happened a secret, at least until dinner was over – or later. It was the most Elaine and Livia could have hoped for with two telepaths in the house, one of whom already had a good idea of what he should expect for dinner as a result of having eavesdropped earlier. And even Livia knew that Oskar’s not-so-secret desire to get Hannah back for his involuntary dip in the pool (along with his bicycle), could only be held at bay for a while.

And so, while the girls bathed Einstein and themselves, all at the same time (another interesting story in and of itself, involving multiple fur-clogged hair driers and a destroyed shower curtain, preceded by an extremely tight squeeze in the tub), Elaine and Livia scrubbed down the kitchen and prepared the rest of the dinner, and Rich and Nils set the table.

Finally, the last of the guests had arrived, and dinner was ready. Oskar ticked them all off in his mind: Dad, Mom, Mr. and Mrs. Sandstrøm, Jonathan, Henry, Jack, Maggie, Ryan, Janice, Jason, Hannah, Eli, Sava, Jeff, and himself.

Hannah served the spaghetti, followed around the table by Eli with the sauce. They stood there dutifully, as each member of the party helped themselves. Eli picked a few strands of dog hair off Hannah's back.

"Want some, Sava?" Hannah grinned and offered the plate to him.

"Not now, Hannah. Maybe someday."

Her jaw dropped. "Really?!" She knew that could only mean one thing.

"Not really, Hannah. I was just being polite." He saw the look of disappointment on her face. "Perhaps you can convince me when you're all grown up and safe." He winked at her. "But I will take some of that Yorkshire tea."

Ryan grabbed the teapot and filled his cup.

"When are you leaving for London, Jeff?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, Doctor. Sure you don't want to come along? Nils and Livia are going back to handle the paperwork on the sale of their house; but I guess you knew that. And I have some paperwork of my own to complete regarding the delivery of our new plane, not to mention securing my new license certification.

"That's exactly why we aren't going, Jeff. We can't afford to leave all these kids home alone. There's no telling what mischief they might get into."

"Really Papa?"

"Not really, Eli." He winked at her. "Your mom and I are actually going along. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention."

"I'm glad you're coming! I have a lot of questions for you." Jeff cleared his throat and stood up slowly. "As you all know, my six-month waiting period has been over for quite some time now. And finally, I've made my decision. I'm going to do it."

"Congratulations!" Richard stood up and slapped him on the back. Everyone applauded.

When, Jeff?" Elaine asked.

"As soon as I take delivery of the new plane, Elaine. Eli and Oskar have already told me they'd teach me how to fly... as long as I teach them how to fly, too."

Richard laughed. “We’re all looking forward to that day, Jeff. But I’m not sure about Eli learning to fly the plane. She’s hard enough to keep up with as it is.”

“I am not, Papa! Oskar and Mama can keep up with me. And Sava.”

“True enough. But Oskar doesn’t count. He’s always on your side, Eli,” Elaine teased.

“He is, isn’t he?” she grinned at him.

Finally, everyone had been served. Hannah sat down next to Eli and whispered something to her, which didn’t go unnoticed by Oskar.

He was becoming more and more suspicious. Hannah had put up her wall so he couldn’t read her, and the spaghetti sauce was absolutely perfect.

“Hannah, you’ve outdone yourself! This is absolutely delicious,” Jack exclaimed. Everyone nodded in agreement.

Oskar saw the look on her face and suddenly, it all came together for him. “Yeah, Hannah. It’s absolutely perfect! It’s even better than your mom’s. How’d you do it?”

“It’s just Mom’s recipe, Oskar.” She glanced over at Jack, nervously, then picked a clump of dog fur off her sleeve.

“No, it’s even better, Hannah! What’s your secret?” he insisted.

Eli kicked him in the shin. *Knock it off, Oskar. Leave her alone!*

And if I don’t? He grinned at her, mischievously.

Eli told him what would happen if he didn’t.

“Hannah, don’t forget the bread,” Livia reminded her.

“Thanks, Mom! I almost forgot. I’ll get it now.” She hastily put the plate of spaghetti on the counter and grabbed the bread plate. “I did this all by myself, too,” she exclaimed proudly.

Oskar opened his mouth to say something, but after seeing the fresh warning look on Eli’s face, thought better of it. After all, the last thing he wanted was for Eli to be mad at him; especially tonight. Revenge could wait, he decided.

They were soon completely out of everything. Henry had even had thirds. And the conversation around the table had become a bit quieter as everyone was busy digesting what to them had been an absolutely perfect meal.

“What’s wrong with Einstein?” Jack whispered to Hannah. “I’ve offered him garlic bread, olives, and even a meatball. He wasn’t interested.”

“He’s already eaten, Jack. Maybe that’s why.” The evening was rapidly filling up with lies of omission, Hannah thought to herself.

“It’s just not like him,” Jack insisted. “Do you think he’s sick?”

“No, I’m sure he’s fine.” She got up quickly, gathered up a few empty plates, and followed Eli into the kitchen. “Let me help you with the cookies, Eli.”

“What am I going to do, Eli?” she whispered. “Jack keeps complimenting me on dinner and it isn’t even mine!”

Just tell him the truth later, Hannah. He’ll understand. Your mom made you do it, remember? I’ll go with you when you do and explain it all to him.”

“Would you really?! Thanks!” she breathed a sigh of relief.

“And when he hears the whole amazing story, I’m sure he’ll forgive you. After he’s stopped laughing.”

Hannah grinned at the thought. “He will, won’t he?”

The rest of the evening was uneventful. Eli was a bit upset that no one had seconds on her cookies, except for Jack, but that didn’t count because she knew it was merely a sympathy cookie. He could read her like a book.

And, of course, Papa, who always ate at least three. “I’m glad you still like them, Papa!” she kissed him on the cheek.

“I still remember that first day you cooked them, Eli. When you ran across the street from Jack’s house, covered with flour, with a plate of cookies in your hands. And they still taste the same to this day. Perfect.”

“Papa, you always...”

“I know, Eli; I always know just what to say. But I really mean it.”

“I love you, Papa,” she whispered.

§

“Well, that does it, Mrs. Sandstrøm.” Eli put the last dish on the shelf. It was almost midnight now and everyone else had gone home. Jason and Nils had already gone to bed at Livia’s insistence; too many people in the kitchen at once, she had explained. Papa and Oskar had

manned the dishwasher and stacked the dishes for them, and were just waiting for them to finish so they could go home together.

“What is Einstein doing, Hannah?” Richard rubbed his ears, but Einstein seemed detached somehow. He was panting heavily and staring into the kitchen.

“Maybe he’s reliving his feast, Mr. Dawson,” she giggled. “You should have seen the look on his face when he finished.”

“Maybe he’s thirsty, Hannah. Look at the way he’s panting.” Eli filled his water bowl and put it on the floor next to the refrigerator.

Einstein got up, ambled slowly over to the bowl and began drinking.

“Not too much, Eli. I don’t want to have to let him out in the middle of the night...”

As if on cue, Einstein stopped drinking, walked slowly around the table twice, as though searching for something he couldn’t find, then back through the kitchen again. He paused at the edge of the living room rug, turned around twice, stared out the living room window for a second as though deep in thought, then promptly threw up all over Livia’s eggshell-white carpet.

“Einstein!” Livia shouted. She rushed toward him, but it was way too late.

Einstein, a bit startled but also still a bit overstuffed, slowly backed further into the living room, stopping briefly to throw up several more times, until he had disgorged what Eli estimated as being the entire, still unbelievably pristine and easily recognizable, contents of the pot. And it appeared to be still steaming.

For a brief moment, everyone stood stock still, mouths open, trying hard to grasp the magnitude of what they had just witnessed.

“Is he...finished?” Oskar whispered.

He was.

He trotted to the back door as though nothing had happened, and waited patiently for Livia to open the door for him. He quickly vanished into the darkness.

“I smell Anise, Hannah.” Oskar just couldn’t resist, as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. “Eli just loves Anise, don’t you Eli? Myself, I can take it or leave it...”

“Shut up, Oskar!” Hannah glared at him, trying desperately to appear angry, but she simply couldn’t.

They grinned at each other, then burst out laughing. At that instant, Oskar realized he had narrowly escaped a fate worse than death when Eli started laughing too.

“My beautiful carpet! It’s ruined,” Livia wailed.

“Not if we act fast, Livia,” Richard feigned a move toward the back door. “Where does Nils keep his shovels?”

“Very funny, Richard.” Livia grabbed the roll of paper towels off the rack and rubber gloves from under the sink, slid the kitchen garbage can over next to the largest of the steaming piles, and started working. Elaine dropped down beside the second-largest pile and followed suit.

§

It was almost 1:30 in the morning by the time the carpet passed Livia’s final inspection. She knew the living room would probably still smell like Anise and ammonia for a while, but at least the carpet was white again. “Thanks, everyone, for helping out.” She was exhausted.

“Let’s go to bed, Mom.” Hannah gave Eli and Oskar a big hug goodbye. “Thanks, Eli. I’ll need you tomorrow to talk to Jack with me. The story just got a whole lot better, didn’t it?”

“That depends on your perspective,” Livia said, darkly.

Einstein was waiting patiently at the door, and snuck in past the Dawsons when they left. Hannah waited for him on the steps before following her mom upstairs. “You’ll get nothing else to eat until tomorrow!” she admonished him.

Einstein was okay with that.

Chapter 53: Eli's Ghost

Oskar rode his bike rapidly down the hill toward the lighthouse. He knew where Eli was, but he also knew she was trying very hard to keep him from knowing. And he was afraid for her. And he was afraid of what she would do if he approached her. Would she just fly away and leave him behind again? And if she did, should he go after her; a pointless exercise since when it really mattered, she was so much faster than he? It had taken him days to find her, even with Hannah's help. And she had been extremely difficult for Hannah to find, in spite of her greater talent in this area; they had never expected her to be so near. He really didn't want to start over again, but he simply had to understand what had gone so terribly wrong. And why after all that had happened, had she picked that place to go? Did it mean something to her that would help him understand what happened, or was it just randomly chosen?

He reached out and, very lightly, touched her presence – so lightly in fact that all he could see was that she was still there, and still alive. Nothing else. He dared not do more.

He pulled up at the base of the cliff and after giving it a bit of thought, decided against using the elevator. If she sensed his presence when he made the change now, it would still be too late for her to leave before he reached her anyway. If Hannah was right, she was a long way from the entrance. In fact, he knew she was physically quite close to where he was right now. He pressed his hand against the solid rock face of the cliff, trying to imagine the twists and dips of the cave floor as it wound its way down toward the heart of the island from the sea side of the lighthouse rock. He sighed, then took off his shirt, slipped on his backpack and grew his wings. He rose up over the lighthouse, looped down over the southern cliff and dropped swiftly onto the grass lip of the cave. He retracted his wings and stepped quietly into the darkness.

Eight days earlier:

Eli was still laughing when she stepped out of the shower and dried herself off. She was a bit tired, but extremely happy and content for the first time in a long while. Einstein had made her day absolutely perfect, especially compared with those dark days they had all endured over the past month. She shuddered, then hastily put them out of her mind. "Remember we're sleeping in my room tonight, Oskar."

"Okay, Eli. I'll be there in a few minutes." It didn't matter a whit to him at this point where he slept tonight, as long as it wasn't without Eli. He turned around slowly and let the hot water play over his skin. It was just so relaxing he figured he's stay for a little while...

Eli dried her hair, then flopped down on her bed, arms outstretched, and stared up at the ceiling. She hadn't even turned the lights on, not only because she didn't need to, but she just didn't want to; tonight, her room was prettier in the dark. The exceptionally bright moonlight reflected off her zenith blue wall and flooded her with its soft aura, turning her sheets and even her normally pale white skin a soft blue. *Mama would just love this*, she thought to herself as she experimented moving her arms and legs around, seeing which positions caught the glow and emphasized the blueness of her skin the best. She knew Mama had finally taken up painting again, and she was so looking forward to flying with her at night on her art quests, just like in the

old days. When she finally found what was, to her, the perfect position, she closed her eyes, idly imagining what it would be like if she were really blue, and waited patiently for Oskar.

Finally, Oskar had had enough. He realized that if he stayed in the shower any longer, he was liable to go to sleep leaning against the wall and wake up as a prune. He was completely relaxed now and his head was full of warm, fuzzy thoughts – the foremost among them, the glimpse Hannah had given him of their home in the forest meadow. He turned off the water, dried himself off and moved quietly down the hall to Eli's room.

He gasped involuntarily when he saw Eli lying there, bathed in the blue glow that flooded her bed and spilled onto the floor around it. He hesitated a moment, then very carefully lay down next to her, determined not to disturb her, because she looked so perfect lying there like that. But she was more than perfect; she was stunningly beautiful, because, of course, he loved her – because she was beautiful. Because he loved her...

For quite a few minutes he watched her chest gently rise and fall with each soft breath, then finally, unable to stand it any longer, reached out and gently caressed her blue cheek.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Your...eyes are even bluer than you are," he whispered, his head still full of the apparition he had seen when he slipped into her room.

"They're always blue, Oskar," she teased. She put her hand over his and pressed it gently against her cheek.

"You don't have any idea at all how beautiful you are, do you? You're – like one of Hannah's fairies," he whispered, so softly that even she could barely hear him.

"And you're...beautiful too, Oskar," she whispered back. Even though she had called him 'handsome' in the past, she had never particularly liked the word, especially with respect to Oskar, because it implied things – other things – that Oskar wasn't. It implied something...completely formed; finished; complete—and old. And to her, Oskar was still a beautiful work-in-progress; perfect in his very incompleteness – kind and soft, loving and giving. 'Beautiful' is the first word that came into her mind that first night when he had caressed her cheek on the jungle gym, and she had never come up with a better one, no matter how hard she had tried. Oskar was beautiful and would always remain so in her mind. She kissed him gently.

"Do you want me to show you what it would be like if you were really blue?" Oskar teased.

Eli grinned at him and nodded vigorously.

He slowly and deliberately took her in his arms, held her up against him and nuzzled her neck. "You even smell blue; like blue roses."

He felt so warm and nice, her sweet, gentle boy, whom she had loved since she first saw him in her dreams, back when she was alone a hundred years ago in Stockholm and the beautiful music had first raised her up and given him to her. Would he still be the same when he was grown up? Or would he become hard and cynical, cold and unfeeling, bored and uncaring, like so many other old life-scarred shadows of men she had met over the years?

He sighed and shook his head impatiently. “It’ll never happen, as long as I have you. I won’t let it. Remember, Eli; I’ve always promised you that I will be whatever you want me to be.”

“I like you just the way you are,” she whispered hoarsely.

He pressed his cheek against hers and squeezed her even tighter. And bathed in the soft blue light, they shared their love for each other over and over again, until finally they drifted off to sleep and dreamed wonderful dreams together.

§

Eli opened her eyes, stretched, kissed Oskar on the forehead, and slipped out of bed.

Good morning, Eli.

Hannah! How long have you been awake? She waved to her through her porthole window. Hannah, face framed in her own window next door, grinned and waved back.

I’ve been watching you two sleep now for almost two hours. You were purring! And every time Oskar squeezed you, you purred even louder. Like a squeaky toy!

Eli blushed. *I didn’t!*

Yes you did! You were so cute!

Well... Oskar and I...I mean...Oh Hannah! I’m so happy right now.

I know Eli. She grinned at her.

And it’s mostly your fault, Hannah. Yesterday was so much fun!

And none of it is Oskar’s fault? she teased.

Oh Hannah! I love him so much! Sometimes I can’t believe he’s even real. He’s so much better than I am.

No! He’s not!...I mean...

Yes. He is, she said softly. *I have him, he’s all mine, and he loves me – but I don’t deserve him. I’m too selfish. I wouldn’t even be here if I weren’t selfish.* Her past darkness and its burden of

death was on her mind more and more often these days. She attributed it to her aging; to her growing ‘maturity’ as Papa had put it, but if this was what it was like to grow up, she wasn’t sure she liked it at all. Things were so much easier when she was 12.

Hannah was worried. They had had this talk before, she knew, but this time, it seemed different somehow. Eli seemed more solemn; more certain of what she was saying. In the past, Hannah had always felt as though Eli really just wanted her to talk her out of feeling that way, which she was easily able to do – but not more recently.

You don’t mean it! You’re everything to him! How can you say that?!

Eli looked up at her, startled. *I...I’ve never heard you sound so worried about this before, Hannah.* She smiled at her. *You know me; it’s just talk. I just...love him so much right now, I can hardly stand it. And I don’t know why. Or what’s changed.* She looked down at her feet.

Hannah smiled, then closed her eyes and, just to be sure, looked once again into Eli’s future. Their home in the meadow was still there. She breathed a sigh of relief.

§

“I think it’s the right thing to do, Nils. I never could understand why you were selling the place, as full of memories as it is.”

“Jeff, if you had suggested this possibility to me a week ago, I would have said you were nuts! But when Livia and I took our final walk-through with the buyer, and I saw the growth marks on Hannah’s and Jason’s closet door frames, and Einstein’s claw marks on the stairs, I looked at Livia, and ...” Nils shrugged his shoulders. “We just couldn’t do it. The buyer was disappointed of course, and we’ll lose some money, but...it was worth it. Now, all we have to do is work out the details with the realtor. Sorry to drop this on you at the last minute.”

“That’s perfectly fine, Nils. It’ll give me a chance to come back in a few days to pick you up – in the new plane. You two will be my first passengers.”

“Don’t tell Jason and Hannah we’re doing this, Jeff. We want to surprise them. They’ve both been against selling it from the start.”

“Maybe you could bring them all with you, Jeff!” Livia said, excitedly. “And we could tell them ourselves! Unless you think they would be suspicious.”

“Offering to let them take the maiden flight with me in the new plane? Ulterior motives would never enter their naïve little minds. Just leave it to me.”

“We’ll stay too, Livia! We’ll all go to London tonight and celebrate. Oskar and Eli will be clueless, Jeff! I think it’s a wonderful idea. And as long as they’re all here, they can go through their things again and decide what else they want to take back to the island with them. And

perhaps we'll take the MG out of mothballs and go on a road trip. I'll drive, of course." Elaine winked at Richard.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." He put his arm around her. "There won't be a problem if we don't go back with you today, will there Jeff? Will you have to modify your flight plan?"

"No, Doctor. I could, I suppose, but it's really not necessary, and frankly, I don't want to take the time. Remember, the original flight plan had both you, the Dawsons, *and* Jonathan listed as passengers, and I didn't change it when Jonathan bowed out at the last minute."

"Good! We'll see you in a few days then."

Jeff watched them drive off, smiled to himself, and walked slowly toward the Archaeogenetics hanger. He thought about how much he enjoyed his job in spite of some of the recent drama and the subsequent confrontation with the BbC. He knew it wasn't only because of the kind, decent folks like the Dawsons and the Sandstrøms, and the respect everyone in the organization showed him, but also because of the strength and maturity of their children. He wasn't a kid sort of person at all; he knew that with his lack of patience and his short temper, he would make a poor father. But these four, with their combined courage *and* humility, had won his heart. To him, they were perfect children. And after he heard the behind-the-scenes tale of the dinner the other night, he liked them all the more. He was impressed that, in spite of the recent turmoil in their lives, they could still enjoy themselves so much.

The plane was sitting on the tarmac waiting for him, and the hangar door had already been closed behind it. The Archaeogenetics' fairy logo on the fuselage was bright and new, having just been added when the plane was repainted during their two-day layover. Since they were doubling the size of their passenger fleet with a new plane, he had personally overseen the additions to the old one. Archaeogenetics' presence in the world of business was growing almost daily, and Jonathan had decided that their visibility in the real world would be greatly enhanced by having such a striking logo on their new 'fleet.' He walked around the plane, examining it closely until, finally satisfied, he climbed aboard, ran through his pre-flight check list, and settled into the cockpit.

He started the engines, waved to the ground crew, and taxied slowly around the hangar. As he turned onto the taxiway, something caught his eye; something...not right. He looked back at the hangar. The small service entrance door stood open – not normally an unusual occurrence, but quite unusual ever since security had been tightened after Sava liberated the BbC tapes in Sunderland. And the latest problems with Adrian on the island had ramped up their security even more. The hangar had already been secured before he got there. He was sure of it. This ground crew was supplied by the airport itself. He made a quick call to his chief mechanic and left a message.

As soon as he lifted off, he called Jonathan and expressed his concerns.

"You're right, Jeff. The security team always double-checks the hangar after everyone leaves. And there's an alarm system and cameras. Let me make some calls.

Jeff climbed to 5,000 feet, banked to the right, and headed NW towards Liverpool.

§

“So this is where you met Hannah?” Eli hopped off her bike and plopped down on the statue’s pedestal, under one of the Phoenix’s outstretched wings.

“Yep! And that’s exactly where she was sitting, Eli. Right, Hannah?” Oskar parked his bike next to Eli’s and sat down beside her.

“Oskar almost didn’t make it to me, Eli. The fog cut him off at the knees, and he almost lost his balance and fell,” Hannah grinned and sat down next to Oskar.

“Well...it was your dream, Hannah. That means it was your fog, too.”

“I couldn’t very well make it too easy for you Oskar. You might not have had as much fun saving me if it were too easy.”

“And when did you see our house? What did it look like?”

“We were down at the curve on White Road, Eli. Just above the village. And since it was dark, all I could see were the windows, all lit up and friendly-looking.” Oskar squeezed her hand.

“Good! So you didn’t really see what it looked like. I don’t really want to know too much.” Eli was relieved.

“Well, I *could* tell it was two stories, Eli, and had lots of big windows.”

“That’s still okay! I like two stories and I like big windows!”

Oskar looked at his watch. “Isn’t the plane landing soon?”

“You’re right, Oskar! And we’ll be able to see them coming from here. Hannah? Can you hear them?”

“No, Eli, I can’t. Now isn’t that odd! I should be able to hear them by now...”

“I can’t hear them either, Hannah,” Oskar said. “Maybe they’re running late or something.”

Hannah jumped to her feet. “Uh-oh! Sava’s really mad about something, Eli. He’s shouting at Jonathan.”

§

“How could this have happened without us knowing in time, Jonathan? The tape clearly shows them placing something in the wheel well – something Jeff could have checked if the alarm had gone off. They must have disabled it!”

“I don’t know, Sava. But I find it strange that, after taking the time and care to shut off the alarm, they left the cameras running and the service door open. It’s almost as though they wanted the security guard to find it, and check the tapes.”

“But only after the plane, which as far as they knew had the Dawson and Sandstrøm adults, and Jonathan aboard, had taken off!”

“So you think they wanted us to know? Before Jeff landed?”

“It certainly looks that way.” Sava paced back and forth. “Does Jeff have a chute on board?”

“It’s a jet, Sava. No he doesn’t,” Jonathan said, sarcastically.

“Maybe if he can stay in the air until it gets dark, I could fly up and...”

Jonathan shook his head. “Can you fly 105 miles an hour, Sava? That’s the stall speed of the plane. And we don’t know what kind of bomb it is; or even if it *is* a bomb at all.”

“What else could it be? Everyone but Jack and Henry was supposed to be aboard; the heart of Archaeogenetics, or at least the heart of this research project. They were probably counting on the rest of us to scatter in disarray, afraid of what they might do next. And the bomb has to be altitude-sensitive, Jonathan! They couldn’t risk a timer; the departure time was still up in the air until after they placed the bomb.”

“You’re probably right, Sava,” Jonathan sighed. “Let’s let Jeff know and see if he has any ideas.”

§

“Why aren’t our parents on the plane, Hannah? I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know, Eli. But Sava thinks the BbC put a bomb on the plane to kill them all on the flight home! But now it’s only Jeff.”

“Only Jeff? What do you mean?” *It means that Mama and Papa are safe...this time*, she thought to herself, and immediately felt ashamed – ashamed that she was relieved, even though Jeff was still in danger.

“He’s flying home alone, Eli. With a bomb on the plane that could go off at any second!” Oskar squeezed her arm.

“He’s all alone, Oskar! You and Hannah can’t even talk to him because he hasn’t had the shot yet. He’s all by himself!” Eli was suddenly frightened for him; and she wasn’t sure why.

“Sava and Jonathan are talking to him on the radio, Eli. He’s not alone.”

“It’s not the same thing! He’s alone!” Eli shouted, still angry with herself. *And he might even die alone, and fall into the ocean, and be gone forever!* Now that she had vocalized it, the thought terrified her; at least partly because if something happened to him, it would be her fault.

“Stop it, Eli! He’s going to be just fine. Jack and Henry are coming and they’re talking with Dad. They’ll figure something out; they always do.” Hannah was worried now. This was so unlike Eli.

“But what if they don’t?!”

Oskar took her face in his hands, “They will, Eli. I promise.”

The three of them stood together on the hill next to the Phoenix anxiously watching the sky to the south, as Jack, Henry, and Jonathan, together with the others in London, put their heads together in the communications room.

§

“Hannah? Can you see the future yet? Will the plane...”

“I can’t, Jack! I’ve tried! I can’t see anything, and I can’t find him in the more distant future either...anywhere!”

“Okay, Hannah. Jeff is going to circle the island at 15,000 feet until the sun goes down, then he’s going to attempt a landing. But first, Sava will try to intercept the plane at about 5,000 feet after Jeff depressurizes the cabin and jettisons the door, but he considers it a long shot at best. We’re still working on the details, so if you sense any change at all in the future, let us know immediately. Oh, and Jeff told me to thank you for trying, Hannah, but not to feel bad. We all knew it was a long shot. It seems that the outcomes of these kinds of crises are somewhat unpredictable, at least in your experience. Remember Eli and the fog.”

“I’m sorry Jack! I’m so sorry. Tell Jeff I’m sorry!!” The tears welled up in her eyes. *If only I were older and more experienced, like Gudmund!* But then she remembered: even Gudmund’s father was unable to foresee his own death. If he couldn’t do it, how could she? *But I have to try!* She closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and concentrated even harder.

§

Once more, Jack. Tell him to try it once more. Sava glanced behind him as the jet circled back and bore down on him once again. He waited until he could see the slight fishtailing and wobble as the plane approached stall speed; his cue to pour on the coal. He surged forward, wings pounding furiously, heard the roar of the engines, and counted: one – two three! He grabbed for

the door, felt the sudden jerk as his claws connected and dug in, then he was suddenly tossed head over heels through the air, still clinging to a twisted piece of aluminum framing. *Damn it! I just can't do it Jack! I thought maybe I could brute-force it in spite of the speed difference, but all I succeeded in doing was tearing off a part of the door frame.* He tossed it away disgustedly.

Jack sighed. *Okay Sava. All he can do now is try to land. And all we can do is hope.*

Sava spiraled down and began circling the runway. Jeff rose up to 10,000 feet again, jettisoned most of the remaining fuel, then swung out to sea, dropped into the flight path and descended slowly towards the runway. Once he dropped below 5,000 feet, he knew the end could come at any moment. He felt light-headed; detached somehow. He could see everything with an ethereal yet clearly-defined crystal clarity. He could imagine Jack, Henry, and Jonathan in the communications room, anxiously watching his progress. He could just make out the phoenix on the ridge where he knew the children were watching his descent. He suddenly wished they were somewhere else; anywhere but here. He couldn't bear the thought of them seeing...

He watched the altimeter closely. "4000 feet, Jack ...3500... 3000... 2500... 2000...1000 and holding..." he passed Arrowhead Island on his right and dropped quickly to 500 feet over the bay. "I'm still here, Jack." He clenched his teeth, lowered the flaps, and grabbed the landing gear lever...

Suddenly Hannah could see the bomb in the wheel well clearly, a small unobtrusive black box fastened just beneath the near edge of the right wing in a small gap between the fuselage and the retracted wheel. *I see the bomb, Jack!*

Just as suddenly, she somehow knew exactly how it worked. She could see the battery, the small orange brick of Semtex, the detonating cord...she followed the protruding pair of wires to a small microswitch taped between two wheel struts. She saw the landing gear hatch open in slow-motion and the gap between the struts widen as the wheel slowly descended. She heard the click of the switch...followed instantly by a sudden flash of light which rapidly expanded, obliterating everything in its path...

Jack!!! Tell him to stop! Don't let him put the wheels down!! She held her breath, grabbed Eli's arm tightly, and with a dizzying change of perspective, saw them all standing together next to the phoenix through Jeff's eyes, silhouetted against the moon. They felt the half-smile on his face as, for a fleeting moment, he allowed himself the luxury of thinking about how surprised they would all be when he flew them back in the new plane. They heard the crackle of the radio, Jack's frantic voice...and he was gone.

Hannah screamed. A ball of light lit up the night sky, followed by a clap of thunder. The plane came apart in the air and chaotically scattered itself across the bay, leaving trails of fiery iridescence in the otherwise still, moonlit sea.

And Eli saw everything in stark, unforgiving detail—first through Hannah's eyes, then through her own as Hannah's brief journey into the future suddenly became the present.

The one thing she didn't see, that she was so desperate to see, was his soul; the gentle soul that, with Hannah's help, she had briefly touched for the very first time mere seconds ago. And that was the final straw; the one that pushed her over the edge into an old, familiar madness.

Chapter 54: Descent into Darkness.

Oskar stood there motionless, arms at his sides, unable to fully grasp what he had just seen. Hannah, sobbing quietly to herself, took Oskar's hand in hers and squeezed it tightly. They watched Sava fly rapidly back and forth across the bay no more than three feet above the water, frantically searching for any sign of life... or death.

Suddenly, Oskar dropped to his knees, hands over his ears, trying in vain to mute the primordial scream of despair, rage, and hopelessness that assaulted his senses and rebounded back and forth inside his skull. The pain was unbearable! He rolled over in the grass, felt the wind brush his hair back, and as fast as it began, it ended. And Eli was gone. Not out of sight—he could see her rapidly gaining altitude over the far hills—but gone; no longer there. Only her clothes remained, scattered across the grassy hill.

“What’s happened to Eli, Oskar?! What’s wrong with her? She was in such terrible pain, but now I can’t see her any more. Where’s she going?”

Tell Papa and Jack, Hannah! And Mom! Especially Mom.” He stripped off his shirt and unfurled his wings. “I’m going after her.” He leaped into the air. *Eli! Where are you going?*

There was no response. There was nothing left of her in his mind; none of her softness and love; none of her at all. And as fast as he was flying, he realized quickly that she was still outdistancing him somehow, and by a huge margin. He’d never catch her, and because he couldn’t feel her, he was going to lose her.

Please, Eli! Wait for me! Talk to me! But it was no use. After a half-hour, he couldn’t see her at all, and if he didn’t catch her soon, he’d have to turn back. It had been two days since he’d had Ejuice. He’d never make it to the mainland and back. And he couldn’t remember the last time Eli had had some. Would she even be able to make it there at all? The island was a black speck on the ocean behind him now, and he could just make out the dark contours of the mainland over 30 miles away.

Oskar! Come back! You’ll never catch her now! And you’ll not make it back if you go any further.

He could tell by her tone that she wasn’t guessing; she was dead certain. He wasn’t about to argue with her. Reluctantly, he turned and headed home.

Your mom and dad are on their way home, Oskar. They’ll be here in less than an hour. I’m sure Eli’s just upset about Jeff. She’ll be home soon; I just know it!

Oskar wasn’t so sure. He’d never seen her act that way before, and over the last couple of weeks she hadn’t been herself anyway. She had even implied that she wasn’t sure she wanted to get any older. Something was going on. *Damn it! I should have talked to her about it. I knew something was wrong, but I just figured she’d work through it herself. This is all my fault!*

Oskar, just come back! She'll come home soon, and then we can all talk to her about it. We'll work it out; we always do. We're soulmates, remember?

Oskar smiled in spite of himself. *Okay, Hannah. Maybe you're right.*

He circled over the phoenix, dropped down in front of her and took her in his arms. "Oh, Oskar! I was so afraid I was going to lose you both, and after what happened to Jeff..."

"Is...is he..."

"Sava found him a few minutes ago, Oskar." Her eyes filled with tears. He's...gone!" They stood there holding each other, sharing in each other's pain in the moonshadow of the wings of the phoenix, until Jack gently called them home. They rode silently down the hill, leaving Eli's bicycle leaning forlornly against the pedestal. Oskar hoped against hope that she'd return for it and everything would once again be good. Already, his heart ached for her.

§

There was silence around the dining room table once Sava and Elaine had returned from their search, broken only by Hannah's soft sobbing. "Jeff was so nice, Mr. Dawson. He was going to fly us to London in the new plane, and surprise us with Mom and Dad's decision to keep the house." She put her head on Oskar's shoulders. "He really liked us, and we never even knew!" she cried even harder.

"He did, Hannah. He liked us all, but especially you children. And no one was more surprised and puzzled by that than he was."

"Can you see anything of Eli, Hannah? Anything at all?" Elaine asked.

"No, Mrs. Dawson. And she could be anywhere! Anywhere at all! She could be hurt...or worse!" Oskar put his arms around her and they cried on each other's shoulders.

"She's quite resourceful, Hannah. Remember, she survived alone for over 200 years on her own. We're just going to have to wait until she decides to come back." Elaine said, softly.

"Meantime, I think we should all try to get some sleep. Sava is going to keep looking for her until tomorrow morning."

"Mom? Can Hannah...I mean..."

Elaine looked at Liva, questioningly. Livia nodded.

"Yes, Oskar. If she wants to, she can stay with you tonight."

"Thanks, Mrs. Sandstrøm," Oskar whispered. He stood, took her by the hand, and they went slowly up the stairs together.

They sat for a while on Eli's window seat, staring across the harbor toward Arrowhead island, trying to imagine where Eli might be, and whether she was cold and alone, and whether or not she was safe. Finally, they climbed into her bed, and held each other tight.

"Maybe when we're touching, she can see us, Oskar." She said softly. "You know, like I can see you two when you're touching?"

He smiled at her. "I hope so, Hannah. In fact, I'll bet she can!" He squeezed her even tighter, and finally after what seemed like hours, fell asleep and dreamed that Eli was at that very moment, speeding down the hill for home on her bicycle, sorry she had worried them all so.

§

Three more days passed with no sign of her. They searched the newspapers and called hospitals but there was nothing, probably because their search was further hampered by the huge scandal that had rocked the western world. The newspapers were full of nothing but stories of the mysterious video tapes that had suddenly appeared simultaneously at all the major world newspapers, the United Nations, and the major Western governments, clearly implicating the BbC in the Kennedy assassination. The FBI had already picked up the shooter from the grassy knoll, who had folded under questioning and confirmed much of what was on the tapes. Several key members of the BbC were already under arrest and others were being sought, with the full cooperation of Interpol and ostensibly, the modern, but now fractured, leadership of the BbC.

"Sava is bringing in copies of all the small, area newspapers, Elaine. We might have better luck with those, since they're more likely to be covering local stories of interest."

"Good idea, Rich. Have we heard anything from the BbC yet?"

"They initially denied any involvement, but when Jonathan threatened to make public the minutes of a more recent meeting on top of the assassination tape—one in which their plans to gain complete control of the newly-formed World Trade Organization were first laid out—they assured him the matter would be taken care of. Within the next week, I understand, although Jonathan didn't elaborate on what 'taken care of' actually meant. And I'm not sure I want to know."

"But why, Rich? After the failed bomb attempt on the island and our threats to expose them, why would they take the chance? Remember, they fell all over themselves trying to convince us that Adrian was acting on his own, which of course we never would have believed if Oskar hadn't already verified it when he read Adrian's thoughts. If nothing else, it proved that they thought we meant business."

"I think we bruised a lot of egos, and in an organization made up of current and retired independent world leaders who are used to getting their own way, there were bound to be a few willing to take another chance. And it might even have worked if we had all been aboard, as per the flight plan."

Oskar and Hannah suddenly burst into the kitchen. “Mom! Eli was here last night! She took her locket!”

“Slow down, Oskar! How do you know she took it last night?”

“Because Hannah and I looked at it last night before we went to bed, Dad. We were talking about when they first met.”

“That means Eli can still fly, Elaine. But that’s impossible. She has no access to Ejuice. How could she...” his voice trailed off.

“No! Eli would never...” Hannah put her hand over her mouth.

“No. Of course she wouldn’t. But what *would* she do?” Elaine was worried now.

“Elaine, you probably understand that side of her better than any of us. What would she be capable of doing?”

“I honestly don’t know, Rich. I know she was ashamed when she discovered that she still liked the taste of blood, but if she were desperate to get back, she might...go there again.”

“How could you even think such a thing, Mom?!” Eli would never, ever hurt anyone!” Oskar stormed out of the room.

“I’m sorry, Rich. I shouldn’t have...”

“You didn’t! Oskar made that leap himself. The truth is, if Eli were herself, all she’d have to do is talk to Oskar or Hannah. She could even make a phone call. No, she’s going through something very personal right now. Hannah? Did you hear anything when you were on the ridge when the plane...”

She nodded, remembering that moment vividly. “It was awful, Dr. Dawson! One second she was so very very sad; the next she was in a fury. Then she screamed, ‘It’s because I should be dead!’ Then her eyes got golden, she got this terrible look on her face and she was gone! Really gone!”

Elaine looked at Rich, “After everything she’s been through, why now? What’s different about this time?”

“I don’t know, Elaine. Even since she found Oskar, her life hasn’t been without trouble, as you so eloquently pointed out earlier. It makes no sense that Jeff’s death would push her over the edge.”

“But no one nice has died because of Eli, Mrs. Dawson. No one she cared about. Jeff was the first.” Hannah looked toward the stairs anxiously. “I’d like to go talk to Oskar now. Would that be okay?”

“Of course, Hannah. Go ahead.” Elaine watched her scurry up the stairs. “She’s right, you know. No innocents have died because of her since you all came to England.”

But so many died in her past, Elaine. Why didn’t any of them affect her like this?”

“Perhaps because she growing up now, Rich. And putting her past behind her is becoming more difficult. And this! This is the first time one of us has died, in her opinion, because of her curse.”

“It all sounds reasonable, but Eli is so strong. I just can’t imagine...”

“Remember when she was afraid of losing her abilities? She was 12 then, and it was still an incredibly difficult decision for her to make. She almost lost it then. She actually threw me out of her room after I had the procedure first, remember?”

He smiled at her. “How could I ever forget? I don’t think Eli had any idea the effect that had on you.”

“And she never will, Richard. What good would *that* do?” All she could think about was how lost and alone her little Butterfly must be right now. Her eyes flooded with tears.

Richard took her in his arms and pressed his cheek against hers.

§

“Oskar?” Hannah knocked lightly on Eli’s door.

“Come in, Hannah.” Oskar was lying on Eli’s bed, hands behind his head.

“You know your mom didn’t mean to say that Eli might have hurt someone, don’t you?”

“I know, Hannah. I’m sorry. It’s just that...” And he knew. He knew it was because, for a brief instant, *he* had thought it. He remembered vividly that dark morning in Karlstad soon after they arrived when Eli had come home upset, because she had killed and fed on a young, blond boy, and how they had decided together that it would never happen again. And then they had found her ‘Papa.’ But still, it had happened. And he had never forgotten it. And Eli had had nightmares about it.

“We both know she could never do it again,” she lay down next to him and took his hand. “We have to find her, Oskar! How can we find her?”

“I don’t know, Hannah! When you look for her, what do you see?”

“Nothing, Oskar. There’s nothing! And I know it’s not that she’s too far away. She was here last night and I didn’t see her!”

“It can’t be ‘nothing,’ Hannah. You told me you could hear ... other voices in the background. You know, the voices of other vampires?”

“Yes, of course, but no Eli...” she sat bolt upright in bed. “That’s it! If Eli’s not herself, she must be someone else! I mean...”

“I know what you meant, Hannah. Do you think she’s...one of them now?” *What a stupid thing to say! She could never be one of them!* He shook his head vigorously, trying to get the thought out of his mind.

“No, Oskar. But maybe she sounds like them right now.” She concentrated hard, trying to differentiate between the dark pin pricks she always felt in the background when she reached out. She scanned them all carefully, but one in particular—one that seemed to be in an inordinate amount of pain—caught her attention. She carefully moved the others into the background and focused on the one. And she sensed her sadness and her remorse, but Hannah had seen many like her before. This one was also in love. It was Eli. She was sure of it.

“Where, Hannah?! Where is she?” Oskar grabbed her arm.

“She’s nearby Oskar. Look!”

Oskar was disoriented at first. There was darkness all around him, but then, he saw the bones. Hundreds of them. And he knew. “She’s in the cave, Hannah! She’s in our cave!” He reached out to her, but Hannah stopped him.

“Don’t Oskar,” she hissed. “She’ll see you and she’ll leave! Don’t talk to her!” She caught a brief glimpse of Eli’s head jerking up as Oskar’s thoughts surrounded her, and her sudden flight toward the cave entrance. She breathed a sigh of relief as that future dissolved away, and Eli moved steadily further back in the cave.

“What should I do, Hannah?” But he didn’t wait for an answer. He grabbed his backpack, rushed across the hall to his room and, after downing one himself, tossed in several bottles of Ejuice from his refrigerator. “Promise you won’t tell Mom and Dad, Hannah. I have to do this myself. It’s the only way!”

Hannah nodded. “I know, Oskar. Only you can do this.” She watched silently as he grabbed items off his shelf and a blanket off his bed, then rushed back into Eli’s room, pulled some clothes out of her closet and stuffed them into his backpack.

He put his fingers to his lips, “I’ll take my bike, Hannah. I’ll go into the cave and bring her out. One way or another!” He slipped quietly out the door and was gone.

Hannah waited for a few minutes until Oskar was safely away, then hurried down the stairs to the kitchen. “Mr. and Mrs. Dawson, I have something important to tell you. Sava and Jack are already on their way over.” The few possible futures she could see for Eli refused to congeal into certainties, but this decision on her part definitely eliminated one of the more frightening ones.

§

Oskar stood next to the cave paintings, letting his eyes get accustomed to the darkness. In spite of his enhanced sense of smell and hearing, he got nothing. Eli was clearly not moving. Which meant she might already be aware of his presence, since her ears were at least as good as his own. He slipped out of his shoes, adjusted his backpack, and headed down the gentle slope into the darkness, surprised that he could see so much better than the first time they were here. This time, he could clearly see the cave open out and the floor drop away into the pit. He stood there for a moment, poised on the edge, plotting out his course down the rock-strewn slope, looking for stable rocks and outcroppings. He was determined to make as little noise as possible, but he also knew he needed to be prepared for her flight, because he couldn't let her get past him. He had the distinct feeling he might never see her again if she did, especially since Hannah's view of her future had been confused and uncertain.

With all that weighing on his mind, he carefully picked his way down the side of the cave until he was standing safely on the lower floor, well clear of the debris field and the bones. He could still smell the stale remnants of Eli's blood, but avoided looking too closely at the pile of bones. There were things he just didn't want to think about right now. The cave walls narrowed quickly to the north into a small, almost invisible inverted v-shaped crack in the center of the back wall. He hurried across the uneven stone floor, knowing that once he reached the smaller passageway, there would be no way she could maneuver her way past him. He'd be able to reason with her – or he could just grab her. He smiled at the thought in spite of himself.

The temperature dropped perceptibly the further into the cave he went. The floor was rock-strewn and uneven in some places, but strangely smooth in others, almost as though it had been worked by some ancient stone cutter. The crack, straight as an arrow, although much smaller by now, was obviously a continuation of the original one that had formed the cave countless centuries ago, when the solid rock had been ripped asunder, he imagined, by some cataclysmic event. Solely because it was straight, he could still see quite clearly in the diffused light.

After he had traveled about 100 yards down the corridor, he could hear water running somewhere behind the cave wall, just before the walls beaded up with moisture and the dusty cave floor became damp. He could feel the vibration of it through his bare feet, and imagined a raging underground river rushing by mere inches away, straining to break through the wall and pour out the mouth of the cave in a giant, majestic arc into the sea.

Although he knew she was here, he still breathed a sigh of relief when he recognized her footprints as they disappeared into the darkness ahead of him, concrete evidence that she had come this way – apparently in no hurry, he thought to himself. He remembered the joy he had felt the first time he had found her footprints in the soft soil near the cemetery outbuilding that night so long ago, when he and Papa had saved her from a fate worse than death and opened a whole new can of worms with *Den Andra*. She was so unbelievably strong then; so protective of them both. He was sure there was nothing she wouldn't do to keep them safe. So. What had changed? Why had she left them all so suddenly this time?

Another 20 yards on, he carefully stepped across a small stream, deep but narrow, that disappeared into a diagonal crack in the wall on the right as quickly as it had appeared on left. The water was crystal clear and smelled pleasantly clean and fresh, accompanied as it was by the smell of the emerald-green grass of the island hills in the gentle breeze that followed it on its dark journey into the depths of the island. Her footprints milled about aimlessly at this point. However, he could see that she had stepped back and forth across the stream several times. He could just make out the spots on the damp cave wall where she had placed her hands, one on either side of the crack, and imagined her leaning forward and sniffing the air just as he had done. Just knowing she had been standing on this very spot mere minutes ago, excited him. He was more determined than ever that this was all going to end soon.

He followed her fading footprints around a gentle bend in the passageway, a spot that marked the end of the crack and the beginning of a chaotically fractured and even smaller, uneven corridor to the left, and stopped short. The short passage widened rapidly into a vaulted room, then ended abruptly against a vertical wall of black rock that spanned the entire chamber. It was now so dark that, even with his eyes, it was difficult to see but there was no mistaking the pale white form huddled against the stark blackness of that wall; it was Eli. And she was sound asleep, sitting upright, knees tucked against her chest, cheek resting on her knees and arms wrapped around them. Her dirty, disheveled black hair hung in tangles across her face. *She looks so cold!* He fought the urge to wrap her up in his blanket and take her in his arms. He had no idea how she would react to him even being there. He couldn't take any chances.

He carefully took off his backpack and moved as close to her as he dared. He knew from years of experience that Eli either slept lightly, or she slept like the dead; there seemed to be no in-between for her. He sat down in front of her, crossed his legs and waited.

It was then he realized her mouth was covered with blood.

Chapter 55: Sava's Promise

Oskar leaned forward and sniffed the air. He was sure of it now; she had drunk blood. He could smell it on her breath, and realized there were remnants not only on her mouth, but in her hair, on her chest, and on her arms and hands. He wondered how long it had been since she had...fed, and whether or not feeding on blood would make her stronger than him. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

And yet, still he waited. None of it mattered to him at this point. All that mattered was getting her back safely home – and to him.

Her eyes opened suddenly, golden and cat-like. She slowly raised her head and stared at him.

“Eli? Please come home. We need to talk...”

She leaped to her feet and lunged past him, but he reacted just as quickly and grabbed her by the ankle as she passed by. She stumbled, regained her footing, then twisted and turned, trying to break free, but he held on with all his might.

She was so strong – much stronger than he had expected her to be. His worst fears were confirmed. He wasn't sure he could hang on much longer, but letting go wasn't an option; it was unthinkable. With all his strength, he grabbed her wrist with the other hand, dug his bare heels into the uneven cave floor and pulled hard. She continued to struggle, but was unable to gain any traction.

Frustrated, she swung at him with her free hand, but he saw it coming and ducked away – unfortunately, not quickly enough. He felt the sting of the glancing blow, and realized her claws had opened up a long gash in his side. He let go of her leg and grabbed her other wrist, then immediately realized his mistake. With her legs freed, she pulled herself upright and slowly backed her way toward the narrow corridor, dragging him across the rough floor on his back. She twisted her arms against each other, trying to break his grip on her wrists, but he held on, despite the pain in his side. He snatched his legs up against his chest, rolled over, and scrambled to his feet, forcing her arms to cross over one another, which threw her off balance for just a second – long enough for him to sweep her legs out from under her with his right foot. She fell hard on the cave floor, dragging him down on top of her. He heard the whoosh of air as his head connected hard with her stomach just as she struck the ground.

She growled in pain and, with a sudden surge of strength, rose up and slung him like a rag doll against the wall. The sharp crack of his head hitting the rock echoed down the corridor. He slumped to the floor and rolled over on his back, head spinning.

He felt the pain, but it was far away; almost dream-like. The cave floor tilted crazily—first one way, then the other—but still he managed to stumble to his feet and, almost as though he were swimming through molasses, stumbled into the corridor, bracing his hands and feet against the rough stone wall, as much to keep himself upright as to keep Eli from getting past him.

Two Eli's rushed at him, but he held firm, at least until a closed fist connected with the side of his head – not once, but twice. It was simply too much. His legs buckled and, despite all his efforts, he slid slowly to the ground, still managing at the last second to wrap both arms tightly around her legs. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the next blow. *I'll never let you go, Eli. You'll have to kill me first!* The smell of his own blood overwhelmed him, and his heart went cold as that forbidden thought leapt into his mind: failure. He just as quickly brushed it away.

She twisted and turned, but still he held on, wrapping his arms even tighter around her legs. She dragged him a short distance down the corridor, but for some reason, no longer struck out at him; she seemed focused only on trying to get away. But the repeated blows to the head had done their damage, and he felt himself approaching the limits of his endurance.

Head still spinning, he fought desperately to remain conscious, but felt his last remaining strength ebb away, even as he felt her grab his left hand firmly and pry his fingers from her leg. He couldn't stop her. Through a blood-red haze, he watched helplessly as she took his other hand, effortlessly pulled herself free, and stood there, motionless, staring down at him with golden eyes. He reached for her again, but she easily stepped away from him. Again, he reached out for her, brushed her leg, but found he had no strength left in his hands. He sobbed quietly to himself, as reality set in. *I can't save her! I've failed her! But I can't...* With a herculean effort, he raised himself up, trembling, on his hands and knees, then reached blindly for her one last time.

He felt her hand brush his – softly this time – and tried to take hold of it, but it was no use. She snatched it away. In the distance, he could hear someone crying softly in the darkness.

Her hand suddenly grasped his tightly and he felt himself being jerked upright, where he teetered precariously for a moment trying desperately to remain standing, but it was no use. His head, suddenly too heavy for him to support any longer, rolled back and he began to fall, but he was caught immediately by her strong arms and lifted up, this time completely off the ground. She carried him tenderly, one arm supporting his head and back and the other under his knees, and placed him gently on the cave floor against the black rock wall. She ran her fingers gently through his hair for a moment; then—she was gone again.

He tried desperately to sit up, but his body simply refused to respond. He cringed when he sensed a sudden quick movement nearby, defensively raised his arms in anticipation of the next assault, turned his head and ... she was crouched there on her knees, solemn-faced, staring down at him.

He smiled up at her. *Your eyes are so blue...*

She sighed deeply, then slid silently down beside him. He felt her warm body press itself against his and the softness of his blanket as she pulled it up over them both. *I'm sorry Oskar! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!* He could feel the outline of Hannah's locket as she pulled herself up against him.

“I missed you so!” he whispered.

He felt the mouth of the bottle as she pressed it against his lips. “Drink this, Oskar. Please?”

He drank as much as he could, snuggled up against her, and for only the second time in his life, kissed her bloody lips.

§

“What are they doing, Hannah? Can you see anything at all?” Sava paced back and forth impatiently.

“I’m...not looking, Sava. We’re too close. She might hear me.”

“How about their future?” Elaine asked. “Can you see anything?”

“No, Mrs. Dawson.” *Another lie of omission*, she thought to herself. She was too frightened to look, for fear of what she might see. If their house in the meadow were gone, it could be the end of everything for them. She just couldn’t bring herself to do it. She plopped down on a rock ledge and put her chin in her hands.

“I can’t get past the water sounds!” Sava grouched. “If it weren’t for that damned river, I could probably hear them myself.” He savagely kicked at the pile of bones, sending them clattering across the cave floor. He knew what she was up to and was determined she wasn’t going to go through with it. He’d stop her no matter the consequences.

“Calm down, Sava! She’ll hear you, and that could change everything!” Richard hissed.

Sava glared at him and continued pacing. “Well, she’ll not get past me, no matter what happens. You can count on it!”

“For goodness sake, Sava! Be careful! You might hurt her!” Elaine said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Elaine, I would never...” he gave her a dark smile. “I guess I deserved that.”

“What’s wrong, Hannah? You look so serious.” Dr. Dawson sat down next to Hannah and put his arm around her.

“Oskar is going to hate me! I lied to him. I’ve never done that before.”

“This was too important, Hannah. He’ll understand.”

“No, he won’t.” her eyes filled with tears. “And Eli won’t either, Dr. Dawson. We’ve always told each other the truth, and I’ve betrayed him.”

“But Hannah...”

“No, it’s okay, Dr. Dawson. I know I did the right thing. I just wish the price hadn’t been so high.”

“Hannah, you never cease to amaze me. Sometimes I think you’re the best of us all.” He kissed her on the forehead. “I promise you, they’ll forgive you in a heartbeat.”

She wiped her eyes. “I hope you’re right, Dr. Dawson. I don’t think I could bear it if they hated me.”

“But you told us all the same, didn’t you?” he whispered softly. Again, he kissed her on the forehead.

§

“We have to go home now, Eli. Everyone is worried about you.” Oskar tightened his grip on her, half afraid she would leap up and run away again.

“Okay, Oskar,” she whispered softly. She stared into his eyes for a moment, then stood up slowly, took his hand in hers and helped him up. She watched him silently as he folded the blanket, picked up the empty bottle of Ejuice, and put them both in his backpack. She moved only after he took her firmly by the hand and led her down the short corridor to the main one, where the soft light wrapped itself around her pale form like a living thing. As beautiful as she was, he found he couldn’t stop looking at the blood on her face.

They continued on in silence until they reached the stream. Eli let go of his hand, crouched down, cupped her hands, dipped them into the sparkling water and washed her face thoroughly. Then she slowly and deliberately bathed herself, over and over again until finally, Oskar took her hands gently in his and shook his head. “Enough.”

He pulled out his blanket and dried her off carefully, paying particular attention to her beautiful black hair, and wishing with all his heart that he had thought to bring her rose shampoo with him. She smiled gently at him, took the clothes he had brought for her and dressed herself; a matching blouse and shorts set that Hannah had bought for her. She deliberately left her shoes in the backpack.

Oskar took her hands in his, leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek and they walked together toward the light.

§

“They’re coming, Sava!” Hannah exclaimed. “And they’re...”

Sava moved in a low crouch toward the narrow corridor.

“No, no! Eli’s fine. She’s with Oskar, and they’re...” she broke into a wide grin. “Mr. Dawson! He did it! Oskar did it!” she rushed past Sava into the passage and grabbed Eli in a tight bear hug.

“Hannah! What are you doing here?! How did you...” Oskar stared past her into a pair of angry golden eyes. “Sava?!”

“We’re all here, Oskar. And next time, don’t be so stupid! What the hell did you think you were going to do if Eli got away from you? Sit on the floor and cry? Wish you had been as wise as Hannah and asked for help? Frankly, I’m disappointed in you. I would have thought that, with so much at stake, you would have come up with a better plan, instead of forcing Hannah to do it for you!” he brushed past him angrily, and grabbed Eli by the shoulders. “And you! Didn’t you realize how many people you would hurt by being so selfish? If you want to die alone in your misery over misplaced guilt, you should make sure you’re really alone first. Frankly, no one but Gudmund would have given a damn if you had done this 50 years ago, and he was a big boy; he could have taken it. But now? After you’ve deliberately gathered around you a group of people who love you with all their hearts? Hearts you would have broken? Frankly, I’m speechless!”

“That’ll be the day,” Elaine snickered.

“I’m sorry, Sava! I...didn’t know what else to do! Jeff...”

“Jeff died because there are violent, selfish people in the world, not because some white-wigged sadistic pile of steaming horse manure cursed you when you were an eleven-year-old innocent. Get over it! Believe it or not, you’re not the epicenter of the dark side. It will thrive long after you’re dust! Just ask Hannah.”

“But...”

“But nothing! Now let’s get out of here. The sun will be down in a few minutes, and you’re coming with me!”

“I’ll fly myself, Sava. With Oskar.”

“Like hell you will! Frankly, I don’t trust you.”

“Mama?”

“Sorry, Butterfly. He insisted. He told us that if he had to wear that ridiculous sunsuit and ride on my back to get here in the middle of the day, he was going to take you home himself. After the sun went down. Your Papa and I agreed.”

“And what’s more, I’m going to stay outside your door all night, and in that blasted sunsuit all day until we have this nonsense straightened out once and for all. Do I make myself clear?” Sava glared at her.

“Sava, please...”

“Shut up, Oskar! I’m not done with you yet, either. Frankly, you’ve irritated me for some time now with your grossly exaggerated sense that, where Eli is concerned, you always know what’s best. You’ve been damn lucky so far, but I fathom this time it was a bit closer than you thought it would be, wasn’t it?” he glared at him. “And remember, I’ve known her a hell of a lot longer than you have! I know intimately the strength of her resolve.” He gathered up the sunsuit, stuffed it in his pack, slung it over his shoulder and bounded up the debris field into the upper corridor. Hannah scrambled up after him.

She caught up with him and grabbed his hand. “Thank you, Sava.”

He smiled at her. “If they don’t forgive you now, just let me know. There’s plenty more where that came from.”

She wrapped her arm around his and waited with him at the cave entrance.

“Eli, what on earth were you thinking? Didn’t you know how this would affect Oskar – and your papa?” Elaine took her other hand and guided the two of them up the debris field. Richard followed closely behind, carrying Oskar’s backpack.

“I...wasn’t thinking at all, Mama. It just all hurt too much and I had to get away. When Jeff died, I was certain that it was just a matter of time before I killed the rest of you. It was my karma.”

“Eli, why do you think it was so difficult for me to decide to stay with you after your papa invited me? On some level I was certain it was my fault that all those children had died at *Den Andra*’s hands because I hadn’t killed him the one time I had the chance. But there was a difference: I was an adult, and had made adult choices. You were, and are, a child. You aren’t responsible for the deaths you’ve caused; and Jeff isn’t one of them in any case.” Elaine could tell by the look on her face that she had lost the argument.

“But there were so many, Mama. And I was determined that Jeff was going to be the last.” She was acutely aware that Oskar was still holding her hand tightly, and she was equally aware that she had hurt him deeply. All she could think about right now was how to make things right again—both with him and with Hannah.

Hannah’s fears and doubts suddenly flooded her mind. *Hannah, there’s nothing to forgive! I’m so sorry I put you all through this. I’m so stupid. I thought...*

We’ll talk about it tonight, Eli. When we’re all safe at home. She already knew what she was going to do. If Oskar could it, she was sure she could do it better.

I’ll carry you home, Hannah, since Sava insists on taking Eli.

Okay, Oskar! Her face lit up. She had never flown with Oskar before.

Don't let Sava give you a hard time, Eli. Oskar handed Dad his backpack.

Eli watched as Papa and Mama leaped off the cliff together and disappeared around the western cliffs, Mama in the lead. Oskar, with Hannah clinging tightly to his back and arms wrapped around his neck, followed closely behind.

Sava waited until the others were gone, then clipped Eli firmly to his harness. "Ready?"

"Yes," she said, icily.

He leaped off the cliff, flew low over the sea for 100 yards, then with several powerful stokes of his wings, banked right, rose abruptly, and soared back over the lighthouse, fully 500 feet in the air above it. Eli gasped in spite of herself.

"Remember this the next time you think you can just fly away on a whim and martyr yourself! You'll never outfly me. I'll catch you every time."

"How did you...?"

"How did I know? It was obvious to me, even before you climbed on my back. You left because you were guilt-ridden. You came back solely because you had what you thought was a solution to your problem; one which involved only yourself, or you wouldn't have come back like a thief in the night. When you took the locket Hannah had given you with pictures of both Oskar and Hannah in it, there was only one logical conclusion I could draw, and you verified the details mere seconds ago: You were going to take advantage of your weakness; the one that replaced death by sunlight. You were going to fly west toward the new world until you dropped into the sea from exhaustion and drowned. You knew Oskar would never know for sure what happened to you, so he wouldn't kill himself, absolving you of the additional guilt over having caused his death. For someone so very clever, how could you be so stupid? Didn't you know he would spend the rest of his miserable, eternal life looking for you? How could you know him and not know that?"

"I know that now," she said, softly. She put her arms around his neck, and pressed her cheek against his.

And how could she not know that I would have spent the rest of mine looking for her too? The thought made him angrier – at himself, mostly, for being so selfish. Because, in spite of his pride in who and what he was, he understood deeply what had driven her to this.

"Sava?"

"Yes, Angel?"

"Are you sure that Gudmund was the only one who would have cared if I had done this 50 years ago?" her eyes twinkled.

She felt the warmth of his smile, and felt his anger slip silently and swiftly away. She finally realized how close they really were, bound together by the same darkness, but at the same time there was also a great gulf between them; the gulf of her childhood. And she feared the narrowing of that gulf.

He swooped down over the compound and landed softly on their back porch. The warm glow of the kitchen lights brought back memories of that special Spaghetti night, and the even more special time later that night with Oskar. As if on cue, Einstein bounded out the open door, put his paws on her shoulders and licked her face. She could see Jack, Henry, and Jonathan rise simultaneously from their chairs at the kitchen table and rush out after him, with Janice and Ryan close behind. Eli glanced behind her and saw the others just clearing the fence at the far side of the compound. Nils, Livia, and Jason were halfway across the lawn.

“You know that this changes nothing, don’t you? I’m still standing guard outside your door.” Sava unclipped her harness.

“You don’t have to, Sava. I’ll be fine.” But she knew he wouldn’t believe her – nor should he.

He smiled at her, turned and went inside, pausing briefly to allow the others to rush past him. He went into the living room, perused Dr. Dawson’s library for a while, then selected a book he had been meaning to read but could never seem to find the time. He knew it was going to be a long night. He glanced out the back window just in time to see Eli disappear in a sea of smiling faces.

Chapter 56: Eli's Karma

In spite of the fact that everyone was glad to see her home safe, Eli could tell there were many unanswered questions that they pointedly avoided asking. And it was just as well; she didn't have any adequate answers for them. Only Sava had given her any indication that he understood, but still he was angry with her, and rightly so. She had indeed been selfish on some level. But did being unselfish mean that she owed herself to them? That she should continue to live among them, knowing that eventually many of them would die because of her? She was caught in the middle; damned if she did, and damned if she didn't. There was no solution to her problem. The love of her life would most certainly die no matter what she finally decided to do. Gudmund's father had won the final battle after all. His curse was unbreakable.

When Livia refused to allow Hannah spend the night with them, Eli didn't have the energy to plead her case, and oddly, Hannah didn't seem to try very hard either. Even Oskar seemed distant somehow. She sat down at the kitchen table and sighed with relief when everyone had finally left.

Her reticence didn't go unnoticed by Elaine. "We'll talk in the morning, Eli. You and Oskar have been through a lot, and I can tell you're not in the mood to talk now." She kissed her on the forehead.

"Thanks, Mama; thanks Papa. I really am tired." Oskar took her hand and led her up the stairs to his room. Eli couldn't think of anything to say to him, but still she could feel his love and devotion for her wrap itself around her like a warm blanket. *How could I have ever thought...?*

Sava stood up as they approached, put his book on the chair, and grabbed her in a tight bear hug, lifting her completely off the floor. *If there's anything you need to talk about, tonight or anytime at all, I'll be right here, Angel.* He kissed her on the cheek, and set her down softly. She smiled at him gratefully.

Oskar took her hand and pulled her gently into her room. She stood there quietly, watching him put his pajamas on, then slipped into her own. She hesitated a moment, then stood on her tiptoes and kissed him gently. "I love you, Oskar. And I'm..."

"I know. You're sorry." He smiled at her. "You're back and that's all that matters."

"No, Oskar. It isn't. And you've all been so good to me, in spite of..." On a sudden impulse, she turned and opened the door.

"Goodnight, Sava." Eli poked her head out and smiled at him.

"Goodnight Angel." He settled down in the chair and picked up his book.

"That looks boring, Sava. I've got some old Eva and Adam comics you could read."

He smiled. "This will do just fine, Eli."

“What’s he reading, Eli? I’ve always wondered what kind of book Sava would read,” Oskar whispered.

“*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, by William L. Shirer,” Eli whispered back. “He’s probably checking to make sure it’s accurate, since he was there,” she snickered.

“Well, if he was there, why didn’t he...”

“You’ll have to ask him, Oskar. I’m sure he had his reasons,” Eli said, grateful for the change in subject.

Oskar slid into bed and held the covers up for her. She slipped in beside him, and felt his arms wrap around her. *Please promise you’ll stay, Eli. I couldn’t bear it if I woke up and you were...*

I promise, Oskar. She pressed her cheek against his. “I promise.”

“Eli?” Oskar paused a moment, mustering up the courage to continue. “You had...blood on your face and hands in the cave. Where...”

“I don’t know, Oskar! I don’t know!”

“But...”

“I don’t remember anything between the time the plane exploded and when I held the locket in my hands, watching you and Hannah sleeping together.” She remembered that moment clearly. For a moment, she had thought she was dreaming; that she was looking down on Oskar and herself asleep in her bed; that Jeff’s death and her flight across the Irish Sea had been a terrible dream. The hollow pain in the pit of her stomach when she saw her reflection in the mirror – her disheveled hair; her filthy, dirt-covered body and the blood on her face – was unbearable.

Oskar winced as she relived that moment. “I wish...” He began again. “I feel so helpless, Eli. I can’t think of anything I can do to make it all go away. Sava is right, though. It’s not your fault.” *It’s not your fault! It’s not your fault!*

But it is, Oskar. I knew it as soon as.... She paused, confused for a moment. As soon as what? When did she know it? After she turned 13? After she turned 14? The more she tried to pin it down, the more elusive it became. All she knew for sure is that it wasn’t Jeff; it was something...ancient; something that had been with her forever that had turned her curse into an unforgivable sin. But what could it be, and why had she been able to go on for over 250 years carrying that burden? What had changed? But deep in her heart, she knew.

“Oskar, I want to stop.”

“Stop what, Eli?”

“I want to stop aging. I don’t want to get any older.”

“But why, Eli? Don’t you want to grow up with Hannah? And Jason?”

“I can’t, Oskar! It’s almost too late already. The older I get, the more unbearable my past is to me. No matter how much I do for my victim’s families, it’ll never be enough! When I was 12, I was stupid enough to believe it would make a difference. But now? We hardly even knew Jeff, and his death was almost unbearable; more so because it was because of me! And your poor mother! Just imagine how she felt when you disappeared and she thought you were dead!” Her eyes sparkled with her tears. “And I caused thousands of people to suffer just like that, just so I could live. And it hurts worse every day I get older! I have to stop!”

“Then I’ll stop too, Eli.” He took her in his arms and rested his head on her shoulder. He could feel her trembling.

“What if it’s too late, Oskar? What if I’m too old already?”

“You can’t vote yet, Eli. You’re only fourteen. Not an adult yet.”

“You’re saying it’ll get worse?”

“Or better. Perhaps there’s a reason why we’re not allowed to vote yet.”

“I can’t take the chance, Oskar.”

“Then we’ll talk to Mom and Dad tomorrow. They may try to talk you out of it, but you know they won’t stand in your way if they can’t.”

“But what do you want, Oskar? Why don’t you ever...”

“I don’t care, Eli. Don’t you understand that yet?”

“But you must have an opinion!”

“No. Actually I don’t. I was happy when we were 12 and you were a vampire. I’m happy now. I’d be happy if we grew up together. As long as you’re here with me, I’ll be just fine.” He smiled at her. “It sounds sort of...stupid doesn’t it? Kind of like I don’t have a mind of my own, and worship you or something.”

“Yeah, it does, Oskar. Do you?”

“Do you remember when Dad told us that happiness wasn’t a destination; it was a method of traveling?”

“Yeah, or something like that.”

“You are my method of traveling, Eli. I don’t really care where we’re going.”

“You can still say that in spite of ...what I did to you today? You weren’t too happy then, as I recall.” *Nor was I.*

“At the end, I was. I had you back.” He paused, “But no one’s happy all the time. I’ll take what I can get.” He grinned at her. But still, he was afraid; afraid of that lingering darkness that could still force itself between them, personified by that cold, distant voice he first heard in the courtyard in Blackeberg, when Elias first told him, “I can’t be friends with you. Just so you know.”

§

Then I’ll stop too, Hannah thought to herself. *I’ll not leave her behind.* She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop; it had just happened. Her bed was no more than 20 feet from Eli’s. *Not* hearing her was almost impossible; especially when emotions were running so high. She had finally given up trying.

She thought about what it would mean to stay 14 forever. Jason would grow up without her, and Mom and Dad might be disappointed that she would never give them grandchildren. The only lasting friends she would ever have would be Oskar and Eli, because no other child her age could ever understand what she had already become. And it would be worse the longer she lived.

She also knew it was a one-way street. Jack had told her that, once the injection had been given, there was no going back. She would never be able to grow up. There was no ‘antidote’ for the aging vaccine.

On the other hand, she remembered what she had seen in the meadow the night that Oskar rescued her from her dream. She knew if she stayed young with Eli, that future could never happen – and she suddenly felt relieved. It was as though some great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. But in spite of the relief, there was a great sadness too, as though she had simultaneously suffered a great loss. She shrugged it off. It was too unsettling to think about. *I’m too young! I just can’t seem to work it out...*

But still she was conflicted. If she followed through with her plan, Eli would no longer need to stay 14 forever. But on the other hand, perhaps it wasn’t her place to try to heal Eli. It had worked when Oskar healed her scars, but hers were fresh from mere hours before. And she had been a willing participant. In this case, she would be forcing herself into Eli’s distant past, uninvited. There could be things there that Eli wouldn’t want her to see. No, perhaps it would be better this way...

Hannah? Why are you still awake?

Sava! I...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.

Would you do me a favor, Hannah? I need to...go for a walk. Would you watch over them and let me know if anything unexpected happens?

Sure! I'll let you know right away, Sava. Well, at least now she didn't have to feel guilty spying on them. She flopped back on her bed, hands behind her head, and listened to their dreams as they dozed off together.

§

Sava walked slowly along White Road, his hunger raging. He stepped past the streetlamp near the corner of the warehouse and walked up the short walkway to his home behind the Archaeogenetics building. He hadn't eaten since Eli disappeared. He didn't realize how hungry he was until he had those few minutes to himself after he had seen Oskar and Eli to her room, and had finally settled down with his book.

He opened his refrigerator, unclamped a couple of bags, and sat down at his small kitchen table. *I should fix the place up a bit*, he thought to himself. *No one would feel comfortable coming here, and I really need to get used to having people over, if only the children. Maybe a few pictures, a lamp or two, a bookcase for all my books, and I really need to get that portrait hung.* He looked at the beautiful painting of Eli that Gudmund had left him after his death, which still rested against the living room wall, obscuring most of it. *Perhaps I'll hang it in my bedroom.*

My bedroom. He smiled to himself. It had been one of many concessions to Eli, who had insisted that he needed one, and made sure Jonathan had included it in the original design of his quarters. So much yet to do! He wondered how mere mortals had the time in their short lives to ever get half the things done that needed doing. He felt he was still behind after more than 300 years, and getting even further behind the longer he lived. He sighed, then grabbed his empty bags and tossed them in the biohazard container under the sink.

He was surprised to see there was already an empty bag there. *Where on earth...?* He picked it up and examined it carefully. It was indeed one of his but there were dirty fingerprints on it, and smears of...blood?! He leaned closer, pressed his nose against it, breathed in slowly, and recognized the blood's ancient origins immediately. The odor brought back vivid memories of the past – of rats and old wine cellars – memories only a long-forgotten smell can awaken. By examining the extent of clotting in the residue at the bottom of the bag, he estimated it had been at room temperature and exposed to the air for at least 18 hours. He carefully moved the container to the side and examined the floor. There was nothing. He got down on his hands and knees and pressed his nose to the carpet, working his way towards the front door and out on the walkway, where he lost the scent. He stood and scanned the ground carefully, spotted the slight indentations still visible in the dry grass, and followed them slowly to the road, where he lost the trail again. He backtracked, then realized there were actually two trails here; one coming and one going. He crossed the road, moved carefully back and forth across the low earthen and rock seawall, scanning the ground carefully.

There! He crouched down next to a small smear of blood on a sharp, half-buried rock, and confirmed what he already suspected: The trail was in a direct line toward, or away from his

house. On his hands and knees, he carefully moved 50 feet towards the village, then backtracked 50 feet from the bloody rock toward the compound, satisfying himself that only one trail continued on this side of the road. He stood up, looked in the projected direction of the remaining trail down toward the water's edge and immediately spotted a small skiff, half-hidden behind one of the large boulders laid down in the shallows to break up the waves – the battery-powered skiff normally tied up on arrowhead island for use on weekends for fishing. What was it doing here? After confirming the presence of more blood on the small electric outboard, he quickly unfurled his wings and headed for the island.

After circling cautiously twice over the boathouse, he landed lightly on the small dock, glanced back across the bay towards the village lights, then turned and followed the small drops of blood along the dock toward the shore. They gradually increased in size and frequency the further away from the dock he got, until the trail suddenly turned and bore almost straight up the steep cliff on the north side of the island at the tip of the arrowhead. Here, there was bent grass and several broken shrubs surrounding a large bloody stain in the dirt. He winced, and moved swiftly up the cliff, still unsure of what had happened here, but dreading what he might find at the end of the trail – or the beginning of it, if his theory was correct.

He half-climbed and half-flew his way up the last 50 feet until, just below the tip of the huge rock monolith that marked the highest point on the island, his worst fears were confirmed. The ragged rock wall looked as though someone had slaughtered a goat here. There were clotted strands of black hair clinging to the jagged rocks and blood spatter splaying out in all directions from what was clearly the point of impact. From his perch three feet away, he could clearly see the route that poor Eli's body had taken in its fall down the steep cliff to the muddy path below.

§

Sava sat for a long time high atop the crest of the arrowhead, trying to imagine what it must have been like for her, but at the same time he realized that, if she hadn't struck the rock face, she would have made it out to sea past Phoenix Island and drowned. Her visit to the island the night before had clearly been an unscheduled one. But her misfortune, caused directly by her new weakness, had been their good fortune in the end. And to him, it proved that her karma had finally shifted. What were the odds that she would strike the only spot on this small island high enough to interrupt her flight, and force her to change her plans? It was almost as if fate had snatched her out of the sky and given Oskar one last chance to save her. And save her he had, at least for the time being. *And thanks to Hannah, I was there to make sure she wouldn't get away no matter what the outcome. How could anyone argue against the power of Eli's karma now?*

He unfurled his wings, dropped lazily off the cliff and glided silently across the bay toward the compound. He landed gently on the emerald green grass next to their back porch and went swiftly up the stairs. He hesitated for a moment outside her door, then opened it quietly and stepped inside. He knelt down next to her bed and kissed her gently on the forehead. *This one is for you, dear Gudmund.* He kissed her again, then rose up, closed the door quietly behind him and resumed his reading.

Thank you Hannah. Thank you for...everything.

You're welcome, Sava. They were asleep the whole time. They didn't even know you were gone.

Sava decided that tomorrow would be soon enough to tell them what he had found.

§

Mama and Papa were already seated at the table when Oskar, lured by the smell of cooking bangers and scrambled eggs, shook Eli awake, waited impatiently for her to put on her slippers, then dragged her down the stairs to the kitchen.

Good morning, Eli. Oskar?" Elaine looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"She promised, Mom. She promised to stay." He pulled Eli's chair out for her, then sat down beside her and squeezed her hand.

"Have you decided yet, Eli?" Papa poured her a cup of tea.

"Decided what, Papa?" she couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"Have you decided what you are going to do to make this right?"

Before Eli could respond, Sava came in and sat down next to Papa, and Hannah rushed in the kitchen door and plopped down next to her. Papa filled Hannah's fairy cup with tea, and put the cream pitcher in front of her.

"I can't, Papa! I can't make it right. I know I've hurt you all, and I can't undo it. I'm so sorry!"

"You misunderstood me, Eli," he said softly. "What can we do to help you make this right with yourself? Your Mama and I know you would never have done such a thing without a compelling reason. And Sava has given us your reasons; reasons which he and your Mama understand far better than I ever could."

"Oh, Papa! I can't grow any older! Getting older has made my past unbearable to me. I want to take the vaccine. Oskar has already agreed to take it too."

"I don't understand, Eli. You made this decision two years ago. What's changed?"

"Papa, two years ago I made the decision to become Human. Growing older was just a part of that; and a part I considered far less important. Except for growing up with my soul mate of course." She smiled at Hannah.

"That's all well and good, Eli. But you know Oskar will do almost anything you want him to do. It's his sweet nature. And because of that, and that alone, you need to give this a lot more thought," Elaine cautioned. "You need to think about what's best for him, too, since he seldom sees fit to give it much thought where you're concerned."

“I’ve decided I’m going to get the shot too, Mrs. Dawson. I’m going to stay young with Eli and Oskar.”

“Really, Hannah? You’d do that?” Eli was caught completely by surprise. She was ashamed she hadn’t taken the time to even think about how her decision would affect Hannah until just now.

Elaine shook her head sadly. “You see what happens when you acquire a family, Eli? Your future is no longer your own. Everything you do affects those closest to you. Do you really want to be responsible for forever altering Hannah’s future, as well as Oskar’s? Not to mention the effect Hannah’s decision will have on Jason and her parents. In fact, I would be very surprised if her parents allowed it at all. She’s still underage, you know. As are both you and Oskar.”

“Mom! You and Dad wouldn’t really stop Eli or me from doing this, would you?” Oskar asked.

“No, no, Oskar. Your mother never said that. She just wanted to remind you both that you are, despite your years, still only 14, and need to take your physical immaturity into account when you make such monumental decisions,” Papa admonished him. “And Hannah doesn’t have the advantage of your life experiences to help her make her decision. She really is only 14 years old.”

“But Mr. Dawson! Eli’s my soul mate! I simply won’t leave her behind! We’d grow apart, and I couldn’t stand that!”

“I’m sorry, Hannah. But you know I’m right. Your parents will never allow it,” Elaine said softly. She moved swiftly around the table, crouched down and put her arms around Eli. “You must know that you have more than earned the right to make this decision for yourself. Your Papa and I would never stand in your way. All we ask is that you think hard about it before you do anything you can’t undo. For Oskar’s sake, Eli. You should know we won’t stop him from doing this either.” She hesitated. “We don’t have the right.” She said, softly.

They don’t have the right!? Oskar thought about those early years when Papa had selflessly taken care of them at the risk of destroying his career, essentially saving their lives, or at least saving them from having to continue down that dark road that, nonetheless, had finally brought Eli to despair. He and he alone was responsible for most of what they had now. And Mom? Eli’s dear Mama, who had been fully prepared to die for them that night she first met Gudmund by driving her car into a brick wall at high speed, killing them both? And who almost died defending them against The Four? Eli, we can’t do this without Mama’s and Papa’s blessing, no matter what they say! We simply can’t! He flooded her mind with all the years of support, love, understanding and devotion they had both given them all these years, never asking for anything in return. *Eli, please...*

So! You do have an opinion after all, Oskar. In spite of the dilemma Oskar’s change of heart presented to her, she was oddly relieved – not because she believed she was wrong, but because Oskar finally believed he was right. As difficult as it was for her, she simply had to give in.

“Okay, Mama. Okay, Papa. I’ll...we’ll wait. Until you tell us we, as Oskar puts it, ‘have your blessing.’”

“Oskar, you continually surprise me!” Elaine smiled at him, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. *Thank you!*

Oskar blushed, “You’re...welcome, Mom.”

Hannah’s latest rationale for not interfering, in contrast to what she had first intended to do, seemed contrived now. Her fears of her future notwithstanding, she was going to fix this, no matter *what* the future had in store for her.

Chapter 57: Eli's Favorite Color

"Hannah? Are you ready?" Eli stood on the edge of the porch next to Oskar, wings unfurled.

"I...think so, Eli. Do you really think this will work?" Hannah tightened her arms around Eli's neck and wrapped her legs around her waist.

"Of course it will! You'll see. Oskar? Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"Sava?"

Sava smiled at her and leaned back in his chair.

"Jack?"

"Ready, Eli! Good luck, Hannah!" He hoped Hannah hadn't noticed how nervous he was.

"Okay, then!" She launched herself into the air, circled the house twice, leveled off, and flew slowly west toward the pool, about 100 feet off the ground. "Now, Hannah!"

Hannah hesitantly grew, then unfurled her wings, holding them steady just above Eli's, mimicking her movements exactly. "Okay, Hannah, I'm letting you go now..." Eli played the cord out through the small pulley on her back and Hannah slowly rose up until they were no longer touching. "How does that feel, Hannah?"

"Wonderful, Eli! The wind feels...magical!" She simply couldn't describe it. It was as though she could feel the individual molecules of air as they slipped swiftly past her wings; the faster ones on top lifting her up and the slower ones below, gently pressing upward against her wings as they would against a kite, keeping her from falling. And she could feel the beautiful balance of it all, and the clear limits of its almost limitless variation, and she understood it! For the first time since her fairy dream, she really understood it in its entirety. She could feel her mind expand outward into the weak neural network that guided and directed every fold and ripple in her wings' multi-faceted surface, and it filled her with joy.

Jonathan calls that Proprioception, Hannah. And it gets better and better! Oskar glided silently in the air above her, remembering his first time when he won the footrace with Eli.

How could I have ever been afraid of this, Oskar? Hannah imagined a glittering trail of fairy dust swirling in the air behind her.

I'm turning now Hannah. Follow my lead. Eli banked slowly toward the north.

Hannah felt the gentle tug of the cord, leaned into the turn, and ancient instincts kicked in smoothly for the first time in her life. The orange glow of the sun, mere minutes below the

horizon, reflected against the clouds, casting an ochre blush across her wings. She could still feel its lingering warmth. And simultaneously, all her doubts and fears of flying disappeared.

You don't need me anymore, Hannah. Eli let the last of the cord trail through her fingers, and dropped down slightly behind her.

I don't do I? Her wings pounded the air and she surged ahead toward the compound to the cheers and whistles of everyone lined up on the porch. *I can't believe how much time I wasted being afraid, Eli! Thank you, thank you, thank you!*

I didn't do a thing, Hannah. It was all you. I knew you could do it! Kindred spirits, remember?

I'll never forget, Eli! Hannah was more certain than ever now. Tonight she was going to pay Eli back for everything she had done for her. And in the morning, Eli's curse would be gone forever.

Hannah! You're too far out over the water! If something happens... Oskar dropped down in front of her.

Silly Oskar. Nothing is going to happen. She banked sharply to the right and headed back toward the compound as fast as she could fly, but Oskar and Eli easily matched her speed.

Oskar snickered.

Just you wait, Oskar! Soon I'll be as fast as Eli. She was absolutely determined to smack him tonight in bed. *Just you wait, Oskar,* she thought to herself.

I'm faster than Eli, remember? I won the race! But he still couldn't forget how easily she had beaten him the night Jeff died. He shook it off and followed them down into the compound.

Hannah flew out over the pool, then turned and headed slowly back toward the porch in a low glide. She suddenly realized she had never landed before – at least not without disastrous results. She tried to remember how Eli stopped, but her mind went blank. She tried slowing down even more, but could feel the wrongness of it and quickly sped up again. The last thing she saw before she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth was Sava leaping out of his chair and unfurling his wings. Mere seconds later, she felt his strong wings wrap themselves around her, and she was guided gently to the ground in front of the porch steps. When she opened her eyes, he gently released her and stepped back, wings at his sides. “How did you do that, Sava? Your wings...how could you fly and hold me at the same time?” Her own wings retracted and disappeared in wisps of smoke.

He smiled at her. “You're young yet, Hannah. Just a duckling. You have a lot to learn.” He turned to Oskar and Eli who were standing behind him, mouths open. “As do the two of you. And don't you forget it...Eli.” He glared at her a moment, then smiled gently, took them both by the hands and led them up on the porch. He winked at Elaine. “Were you worried?”

“Not a bit, Sava.” She grinned at him. “Nicely done, by the way.”

“Let’s do it again, Hannah! I’ll show you how to land this time.” Eli grabbed her hand.

“No! That’s quite enough for one evening, Eli. I’m too old for this.” Livia stood up unsteadily.

Nils put his arm around her waist. “Are you alright, ‘Liv?”

“I’m fine!” she smiled up at him. “Your favorite daughter can fly now. I hope you’re satisfied.”

“I am!”

“Dad! Mom! Can I...”

Livia sighed. “Of course, Hannah. But if this keeps up, you’re going to have to start paying rent over here.”

“Oh, Jack! Did you see how well I did? I’ll bet I’m already as good as you, aren’t I?” she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight.

“I wouldn’t dare disagree with you, Hannah. You flew beautifully.” He kissed her on the forehead.

“I’m hungry!”

Jack handed her a bottle of Ejuice. “I thought you might be. And when you’re done with that, Eli’s Papa and I made sandwiches for you all. They’re in the kitchen.”

“Thank you, Jack.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

“Great job, ‘Sis. Now you have to help me convince Mom and Dad...,” Jason stage-whispered.

“I will, Jason. I promise!” she grabbed Eli’s and Oskar’s hands and dragged them into the kitchen.

Papa smiled at Ryan and Janice. “Have you two made up your minds yet?”

“Aye!” they said in unison, then laughed.

“But we still have a long time to wait, don’t we then?” Janice sighed.

“You’re in good company, Janice. And there are already many new folks here that have even longer to wait.”

“Aye, and I guess misery enjoys company,” Ryan grouched.

Papa laughed. “All good things come to those who wait, Ryan. And you two have already settled in nicely. Jonathan thinks very highly of you both, and of course, since you found Hannah, Eli never misses an opportunity to tout your talents to anyone who will listen.”

“It must be a short ‘tout’ then, Dr. Dawson.” Ryan said, embarrassed.

“Come on in, both of you, before the sandwiches are gone.” Papa followed them toward the door, then stopped short. “Ryan! You’ve got something on your back!” He grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled down his collar. “Oh. Sorry! I thought...”

“It’s just a tattoo, Dr. Dawson,” Janice said, reassuringly.

Ryan pulled his shirt off over his head, revealing a huge tattoo of a menacing vampire complete with claws and fangs covering most of his back. It was extremely detailed, well crafted, and the well-executed shadows and highlights made it appear almost 3-dimensional.

Papa sucked in his breath. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was Sava. But not as I’ve ever seen him before, thank God.”

“Do you really like it? I did it myself,” Ryan deadpanned.

Papa laughed. “Seriously, Ryan. Did you get that done before or after you met Sava?”

“I’m not telling, Dr. Dawson.” He grinned, “But do you really think it looks like him?”

“Exactly like him, Ryan!” He hesitated. “But you might want to show it to Sava later, if at all. After all the dust from Eli’s latest...diversion has settled down.”

“I agree, Dr. Dawson.” Janice quickly pulled Ryan’s shirt back on over his head and dragged him into the kitchen. Ryan was grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

“Why didn’t you tell him that you actually did the artwork yourself, Ryan?”

“It wouldn’t have been as funny then, would it?” he winked at her.

§

The three of them lay on their backs in bed, hands behind their heads, bathed in the reflected light of the gibbous moon. The blue glow on Oskar’s face reminded Eli of that magical night – the night that now seemed so very long ago; the night before Jeff died; the night before her past almost destroyed her future.

“I think it’s about time to retire those pajamas, Hannah. They’re really short, and the buttons look like they’re about to pop off.” Oskar flicked a button with his finger for emphasis.

“Are you saying I’m getting fat, Oskar?” She rose up on her elbow and frowned at him.

“No, no! I would never...”

“What then?”

“You’re getting bigger...I mean taller! They don’t fit any more, because you got them when you were 12 and now you’re 14.”

Hannah reached over and slugged him on the arm.

“Ouch! What was that for, Hannah?”

“You snickered at me when we were flying, Oskar. Did you think I would forget?”

“I could only hope.” He grinned at her.

“I have another pair just like them that fits, Oskar. But it wouldn’t be the same. These are the ones I wore that first night we all spent the night together, and you and Eli became my best friends.” She smiled at him. “And we’ll always be best friends, even if you and Eli decide to stop aging and I can’t. I promise.”

“Hannah, I don’t know what else to do! I think about the awful things I did before, and it seems to get worse and worse the older I get! All those innocent people! I should have died that first night, before I...”

“Before you what, Eli?”

“Before I started, Hannah! Before I decided my life was worth more than anyone else’s.” she rolled over and buried her face in Oskar’s chest.

“We’ll talk to Mom and Dad again tomorrow, Eli. And as often as it takes. And if you finally decide...” Oskar stroked her hair softly.

“We’ll support you, Eli. Oskar and I will always be on your side.”

“Thanks, Hannah. I’m so sorry! No matter what choice I make, it will hurt someone.”

She sat bolt upright in bed. *But if Sava is right, aging will only hurt me.* She shut off the thought quickly; she didn’t want to share it with them. But it made her decision for her. She would continue to age, because no matter how much it hurt her, she deserved it. And if, as she had feared, her mere existence somehow caused the deaths of those she loved, she deserved that too. But Sava, in his simple, direct way had blunted that sword with his persuasive arguments against the curse. She had never heard Gudmund’s father called a pile of steaming horse manure before, but that vivid image would, from that point forward, temper her abject fear of the creature who had forever changed her life. *Dear Sava!*

“Eli, what’s wrong?” Oskar sat up beside her.

“Nothing, Oskar. I’m fine.” She pulled him back down into bed with her. “I’m just tired, I think. All that flying!” she grinned at Hannah.

“We’ll practice landing tomorrow, Eli,” Hannah faked a yawn, “but I’m tired too.” Anything to get them both to go to sleep early. She had a long night ahead of her.

§

Eli? Oskar? She delicately reached out to them just to make sure, but they had both faded away over half an hour before and had finally stopped dreaming altogether. It was time to begin.

She put her hands gently on either side of Eli’s head and pressed her forehead against hers, willing herself through the boney barrier between them by imagining that her weak neural network had expanded and merged with Eli’s own. She deftly sidestepped the faint glow that was Eli’s present and the final essence of her now intangible dreams, and dropped softly into the rainbow-hued river of Eli’s life experiences that flowed slowly and steadily upwards out of her past, permanently coloring Eli’s perception of the present and winding its way into her future.

She took care to keep her essence just out of the flow lest she be lost in it, unable to distinguish between her own soft, pastoral-hued stream and Eli’s starker, more conflict-laden one, in which the brilliant colors twisted and clashed, elbowing their way past one another, each straining to gain dominance, then falling back as others surged forward to take its place. Through the center of it all, seeming unaffected by the chaos surrounding it, was a small, steady stream of zenith blue, varying in intensity, but untouched by all the others. Hannah moved slowly above the river into the past, beyond the blood-red glow of her own near-death at Adrian’s hands, beyond the white agony of Eli’s failed attempt to follow Oskar and Papa’s kidnappers’ plane to Manchester; beyond the brilliant sunburst of Eli’s and Oskar’s beautiful night together after their nightmare in the meadow, and beyond the fiery rapids of The Four and Mama’s near death. And still, there was nothing; nothing that Eli needed to forget; nothing to regret. All the while, the small blue thread pulsed steadily through the chaotic river of colors, tempering it; smoothing out its rough edges; keeping it within its banks.

She realized with a start that she was now beyond her own life’s beginnings, before her own small river had even begun, and Eli’s dear Mama had entered her life for the first time. But even now, Eli’s was larger, more conflicted, and more complex than hers would probably ever be. But she knew she still had over 200 years to go. And the river had taken on new and more sinister streams of bone white, soot black, and blood red, flowing together as a trio, following their own path, sometimes even overflowing the banks and becoming dominant for short periods of time, then fading back into the flow. Until suddenly they filled it entirely.

Hannah stopped. Could this be the place? She looked more carefully and spotted the blue thread, weak but steady, flowing through the heart of it all. *The heart of Eli’s hibernation! After Seth almost killed her! And yet her soul is still here in spite of her parasite.* Hannah was becoming convinced that the blue stream was Eli’s very essence; that it would be there, strong and steady

until the day of her birth. Hannah refused to use the word ‘vampire’ to describe Eli’s traveling companion, but she could see for the first time how it clouded her life and moved it in directions over which she had no control. She sighed, and continued down the now darker river, back into the cold, black nights of a Swedish winter. And Eli’s Papa. And his nightmare that showed them both how much he already loved them. And still, no regrets. Even past Detective Ellstrom; no regrets.

She moved faster now, not knowing how much real time she had left. Time itself seemed to vary and she had lost all sense of it, immersed as she was in Eli’s past. The river was dark and shallow now and meandered aimlessly through a surrealistic landscape where mere shadows of people moved silently to and fro, unaware of Eli’s presence until...

Hannah recoiled in horror as Eli dropped from a fire escape onto a passing shadow. She could feel the pain of penetration, the tendons snapping and blood flowing, flooding her mind with memories she had, until now, suppressed, and she was transported instantly back to the night Adrian’s fangs pierced her own neck. It took all her will to keep from fleeing back to the comfort of their bed and leaving this more primal Eli to her dark pursuits.

It was only then she realized that the blue stream had disappeared completely. She forced herself to stop, and slowly backtrack forward in time until...

The jungle gym. And the beginning of the steady zenith blue stream in her life’s experiences; the stream that flowed steady and strong, never faltering, up to Eli’s present and as far into her future as Hannah could see. The blue that blossomed with Oskar’s gentle caress.

“What did you do that for?”

“I’m sorry ... I—”

“What did you do?”

Hannah smiled to herself as the pieces of the puzzle finally came together:

In the kaleidoscopic river of her life experiences, Oskar was Eli’s favorite color.

§

Oskar’s eyes popped open. *Eli!* He reached over, found her hand, and sighed with relief. For a moment, he had thought... He raised himself up on his elbow and saw Hannah’s forehead pressed tightly against Eli’s and her hands on either side of her head holding her firmly. *What is she doing?! Hannah?*

There was no response. He put his hand on her shoulder and shook it gently. *Hannah? Are you awake?* Hannah’s only response was to tighten her grip on Eli. *Get lost, Oskar,* she seemed to be saying. He looked at the clock: Four A.M.

He reached for her again, but thought better of it. Instead, he reached out and delicately touched her mind. And with that touch, saw a Hannah he had never seen before – strong, self-assured, and intense – moving easily in places he knew he could never go himself. Eli's memories were one thing – he knew most of them by now. But her past? Her living past? To him, her memories were like photographs or at best, short film clips, but to Hannah they were like a full-length film; a 200-year-long epic odyssey, in which everything Eli remembered, or had carefully buried in the darkness, was exposed to the light; horrible things that he sensed as Hannah moved carefully through Eli's dark past, before Blackeberg and even before Gudmund. And there were too many to count buried there, teeming with tooth and claw; blood and bones; tears and desperation.

Oskar backed away quickly, suddenly frightened. He was afraid to interfere, no matter how much he wanted to; he couldn't take the chance, and Hannah clearly wanted him to stay away. He pressed himself up against Eli's back and buried his face in her hair. And waited.

§

There were so many; so very many. And Hannah felt each one as she uncovered it, exposing the raw wounds to the light of day. But as terrible as each of them was, she felt Eli's sense of fatalism; her acceptance of what she was in spite of what she had long ago wanted to be. And with each one she uncovered, amongst the thousands that weren't hidden, she knew that she hadn't found *the* one – the one that had numbed her to all the others.

She followed Eli further into the past from Blackberg, to Norrköping, to Jönköping, to Trollhättan, and Gothenburg; to myriads of small towns and villages, to Stockholm, back to Gothenburg, and finally the beginning – Norrköping once again, to a small cave at the end of the valley, where Eli wraps her sister's bloody dress around her waist and flies west toward Gothenburg. But before that – nothing. A darkness so deep she can't penetrate it at first; a darkness out of which flowed a river of featureless gray, cascading down steep rapids, picking up myriads of new colors as it fell and finally settling into the high banks of a more familiar river, marking the beginning of Eli's 200-year-plus nightmare.

But try as she might, she couldn't penetrate the darkness. And the more she tried, the more certain she was that the key to the mystery lay within it.

She began to think that it would be impossible to penetrate – at least from this end of the timeline. So she moved swiftly past it and realized at once it was actually a very brief period in her life; no more than a few weeks at most. And she wondered what terrible thing could have happened in that brief period that was so much worse than her beginning.

On the other side of the impenetrable darkness was a single murder—Elias's first—a poor hapless hunter who was in the wrong place at the wrong time; terrible for Elias but then Eli still remembered it so it couldn't have been the cause. Then came the castle. And the beginning. And finally, Elias, the sweet, unassuming farmboy, who had his whole life ahead of him before he was chosen. She was surprised to see that Elias was so much like the Eli she knew, but younger in spirit, full of life, still naïve, and surrounded by the love of his family.

So, from there—from the beginnings of Elias’s sweet, gentle life—Hannah turned and looked back towards Eli’s future. She was absolutely certain now that something happened in those terrible dark days that not only destroyed her hope, but burdened her with guilt, and at the same time, turned her from Elias to Eli. And so Hannah slowly and carefully picked her way past the night Elias had been chosen, past the corpse-filled trench and the stench of burning flesh, past his first visit to the cave and Elias’s first murder, and finally, to the beginning of the darkness. She held her breath, put her hands firmly against its tangible surface, and...slowly pushed her way through, peeling it back as she went, exposing what lay within to the multicolored river of Eli’s memories—forever.

Chapter 58: Eli's Secret

Hannah held her breath when she realized that, after killing the poor hunter, Elias had made the decision to kill himself. And all these memories were ones Eli had elected to bury in the darkness. But why? It seemed noble to her somehow that Elias had enough strength to even consider it. She read him as he slowly built his resolve and waited in the cave until the Sun was at its zenith. She watched in awe as he threw himself out of the cave into the glaring sunlight and raced for the cliff, trying desperately to throw himself off the edge so he would burn to death before he could make his way back – and she gasped as the parasite took control and threw him, sobbing, back into the safety of the cave, badly burned but alive.

She watched as he grew weaker day by day, resolved to stay in the cave at night and imprisoned by the sun during the day, until after eight days, his very weakness gave him one last chance to win the battle. The idea came to him slowly, and blossomed on the afternoon of the eighth day. The hunger was with him always now; a gnawing pain that filled his senses, but the horror of killing somehow kept it in check. *I'll die if I have to kill anyone else!* he repeated to himself, over and over again.

He would end it tonight. He would go into the meadow just before dawn and hope that, as weak as he was, he wouldn't be able to make it back to the cave when the sun came up.

Hannah simply couldn't believe the inner strength exhibited by this small waif-like boy; this boy who would soon become the Eli she loved so dearly; the Eli who still agonized over ... something that would happen within the next few days. She was certain of it now, and she knew it had to be a monumental event. She wished with all her heart that she could just take him in her arms and whisk him away with her, before whatever happened...happened. But the past was cast in concrete, she knew. All she could do was stand by and hope that, by stripping away all the black scar tissue, her Eli could finally begin to heal. And so, she did. And she stripped it away with her absolute faith in Eli's basic goodness and humanity, never fearing for a moment what she might find beneath.

§§

He slipped his sister Anna's dress on over his head for the last time and stumbled out of the cave. It was all he had taken when he left his family, unobserved, for the last time and it comforted him somehow. His heightened sense of smell allowed him to imagine that she was right here beside him, helping him to win his final battle.

He made two attempts before he was able to claw himself to the top of the ravine, then with much effort, half-stumbled, half-crawled toward the meadow. Finally, out of breath, he lay down on his back in a wide spot on an old animal trail, almost exactly in the center of the clearing. He was so weak now he was having trouble thinking clearly, but he could feel the creature within him, dark, menacing, and restless. He sensed its impatience and frustration, as he drifted in and out of consciousness. He tried his best to stay away from it; to ignore it. He certainly didn't want to get into an argument with it; he knew he would lose.

§

“Papa! Look here! It’s a little girl! I think she’s hurt!” Elias opened his eyes.

“Let me take a look.” Papa held the lantern over his head as he knelt down beside him.

“Hold this for me Isak.” He handed the lantern to his son, and in the exchange, Elias got a good look at them both. He could see that the boy was young, probably about his age or a little older, long blond hair, blue eyes and a bit slim, a miniature version of his father, who sported a nicely-trimmed blond beard. His rough skin and calloused hands indicated to Elias that he was a man who had worked hard all his life, like his own father. They could be his neighbors – in fact, the boy looked vaguely familiar to him, perhaps from school?

“Can you talk, sweetie? Are you hurt?”

“Please...” *Go away! Run for your lives!* Elias was terrified. What if he WAS strong enough? What if... He probed inside himself. He could feel the darkness stirring, but it seemed weak, unmotivated. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Where are your parents? Do you live nearby? What’s your name, sweetie?”

“E...Eli...”

“Eli? This is my son Isak. We’re going to take you home with us until we can find your parents. Isak, take my pack and I’ll carry her. I know it’s a long walk, but if we pace ourselves we should make it before noon.” He bent down and gently put his arms under her legs and shoulders. “Eli, let me know if anything hurts when I pick you up, and we’ll figure something else out.”

“Please. Go away. Leave me. Please,” he whispered, hoarsely.

“Don’t be afraid. We’re here to help. I promise, as soon as we get home, I’ll send my son into town to find your parents. We’ll have you back safely at home in no time.” He smiled at her.

She felt herself being lifted gently, and involuntarily grabbed his arms as he adjusted his grip on her. “That’s it, Eli. You hold on tight and I’ll do the rest. This is going to be easy. You’re as light as a feather; no trouble at all! Isak? Do you recognize her from school? If she’s from around here, she may be in school.”

Isak studied her face carefully. “No, Papa. I don’t think I’ve seen her before. Maybe she’s new, or lost. I’m so sorry, Eli. You must be terribly afraid, out here all by yourself. We’ll take care of you!” He took her hand and held it for a moment, then blushed and let go of it quickly.

His papa smiled at him. “That was a nice thing to say, Isak. Eli, please don’t be afraid. You really are among friends now.” They moved out of the clearing and into the forest, following the path as it led down the hill to the right, past the steep cliff. After a half hour, they stopped to rest. Papa gently laid Eli in the soft grass and put his pack under her head. “Are you thirsty? Would you like some water?” he reached for his water bag.

Elias shook his head. “No. Please...” he croaked. *They have to understand! They have to leave me!*

“We have to hurry, Isak. I honestly don’t know what’s wrong with her. I’m afraid she may be worse off than I thought.” Elias saw the concerned look on both their faces. “My back is killing me though. I think we’ll make better time if I carry her like I carried you when you were little, Isak.” He smiled at him. “Give me a hand with her. Eli, let me know if this makes you uncomfortable.”

Elias felt Isak’s arms under his shoulders as he lifted him to his feet. His papa reached under Eli’s arms, lifted her to his chest like a baby and guided her head to his shoulder. “Can you wrap your arms and legs around me, sweetie? I think it’ll be a bit more comfortable for you if you can.” He firmly pulled Eli to him and clasped his hands together under her. “Now! How does that feel? More comfortable?” Elias felt his warmth, and hugged him tightly in spite of himself. What a nice man he was. He drifted off...

“Papa, do you think she’ll be okay? She’s so pretty! I hope we can find her parents.”

“She is pretty, isn’t she? I hope nothing bad happened with her...” he had heard of such things before, and then there were the rumors about Törnkvist.

§

The Creature could feel the blood flowing, the heartbeat, the warmth. And so near. So very close. The darkness opened up and it moved closer. Closer to its host, to the weakness. It had to feed. The life of its host depended on it. It touched the soft skin with its tongue. It delicately felt for the Spot and felt it pulsing rapidly against its tongue. Its mouth opened slowly and two razor-sharp fangs formed. The muscles in its arms and legs tightened, but there was no movement; only rigidity. It was time. And the timeless, ancient trigger was pulled.

“Ouch! What the heck?” Isak’s papa reached for his neck, but her head was in the way. He tried to push past, but she was pressed so tightly against his neck that he couldn’t move her. He knelt down and attempted to ease her to the ground, but it was as if she had turned to stone. “Eli! You’re hurting me! Please stop!” Desperately, he grabbed her hair and pulled, to no avail.

“Papa! What’s wrong? Eli, stop! Please stop! You’re hurting Papa!” He grabbed her around the waist and pulled as hard as he could. Eli swung a clawed fist at him, catching him on the side of his head.

Isak dropped like a stone and rolled over on his back, sobbing. “Eli, please stop!”

Elias felt the strength surge back into his body as he drank deeply from the gaping wound. He squeezed harder until the poor man’s back broke and he felt him go limp in his arms. He raised up, saw Isak staring at him in terror and, for a brief moment, snatched control away from It. “Run, Isak! Run for your life!” he hissed. His eyes turned golden once again and he bit deeply into the wound and squeezed and twisted the body until there was nothing left. Somewhere, far away, Elias could feel Isak pounding on his back with his bare fists.

“Stop! Stop! Get off him!”

Elias stepped away from the body and turned to face Isak. In spite of what he had done, his hunger still raged. He reached out and grabbed Isak’s arm as he rushed to his papa’s side. His mouth opened and he bared his fangs. Isak screamed and struggled to get away, but it was no use. “Eli! Eli! Please don’t! Please!”

She pulled him to her and bit down hard on his neck despite his screams of terror. She felt the tendons in his neck snap and savored the irresistible taste of his fresh, oxygen-rich, young blood. Simultaneously she sensed his youth and his sweetness, felt his pure love for his papa, and recoiled in disgust at what she was doing, but ultimately to no avail. She couldn’t bear the sounds of his struggle; his soft moans, the feeling of his small child’s body struggling against her, yet she couldn’t stop – and the ultimate horror was in her realization that she didn’t want to stop. In desperation, she put a clawed hand over his mouth and squeezed until he was silent. She drank slowly and held him firmly against her, deep in ecstasy yet utterly repulsed by what she was doing. His small body finally relaxed and she felt his heartbeat slow and stop. She held him close for a moment, then laid him gently on the ground, his beautiful golden hair splayed out around his angelic face.

And Eli cried. She cried for what she had become. For this kind man and his sweet son who had been embarrassed to hold her hand. The pain of it all overwhelmed her; the pain of having destroyed not one, but two beautiful human beings. She cried for Isak’s dear papa, who only wanted to help a dying child. She cried for a small 12-year-old boy who had bravely stayed to protect his loving father, only to die himself for his devotion. And finally, she cried for Elias, who had died with them both. He was fast becoming a distant memory.

She laid them together under a tree with their arms folded across their chests and their eyes closed, and forced herself to look at them. *See what you’ve done? They’re dead so you could live. And you were weak and disgusting; you couldn’t even fight it. Isak was so much stronger than you were, Elias. He gave his life to protect his father. What did you do? You cried in your cave like the child you were and couldn’t even manage to die properly. And see what your weakness has begotten?* She stopped crying. There was no point now. All was lost.

§

As Hannah tore away the last of the scar tissue, a raging blood-red torrent poured through the gap she had opened and cascaded down the waterfall into Eli's river of consciousness.

It wasn't your fault! It wasn't your fault! It wasn't your fault, Hannah screamed after it. She could see it all so clearly now; Elias's inner strength that, but for fate, would have almost certainly given him what he wanted—his own death. Elias had actually as good as won the battle, but clearly, fate would have none of it. What were the odds that this poor man and his son would happen by at exactly the right time? And what were the odds that they would care enough to help a poor, filthy, almost dead child; one who might even be dying of some terrible disease?

It was such an improbable thing that Hannah couldn't shake the feeling that there was some greater force at work here; a force that was determined to save Eli from herself. But to what purpose? The bodies she left behind as a result of this chance encounter numbered in the thousands. Could Eli have some value that could even begin to make up for all that? Of course, she realized that Oskar would probably be either dead or in jail if it weren't for Eli; and she herself wouldn't even exist without Gudmund's help – help given only because Eli existed. And Eli's Papa. Would he ever have recovered from the deep guilt he carried as a result of his wife's and child's deaths? And her Mama. Elaine would almost certainly have died at the hands of the Other One. And Gudmund. What would have become of him? After his wife and only child died, it was only Eli who gave his life meaning. And no one knew what drove Sava. His secrets were still his own, and yet his love for Eli was unquestionable. Why? And then there was Jonathan; an orphan adopted by a vampire, who has become a great scientist and innovator – who by his own admission would have probably ended up in jail or worse.

But we're so few compared to the other innocents that died so she could live. Hannah's head was spinning now. *We simply aren't worth all those lives.*

§

Eli opened her eyes, disoriented. For a brief moment, she thought about the decision she had made to continue aging in spite of her pain – and then her newly released memories washed over her in a flood. She screamed, leaped out of bed, crawled into the corner near the bedroom door and pressed her fists hard against her temples. Oskar was right behind her and grabbed her tightly in his arms as she struggled against the raw pain. To him, it brought back vivid memories of Eli's first victim in Blackeberg; the blond-haired boy who, in her nightmare, had been Oskar himself. Only this was orders of magnitude worse. He could scarcely bear it himself.

"Hannah! What did you do?! What have you done to her?" Oskar shouted.

Hannah dropped down next to Eli, and once again pressed her forehead against hers. *It wasn't your fault! It wasn't your fault! Can't you see that? I can!* She brutally forced the memories into Oskar's mind. *And Oskar knows it too, don't you Oskar?*

Oskar involuntarily jerked back, as Eli's raw unedited memories engulfed him. But he quickly grabbed Eli again as Hannah's much clearer understanding of the tragedy greatly mitigated its effect on him. And he could feel Eli begin to relax as Hannah relentlessly forced the reality of

what had happened and the improbability of it all into her mind, firmly pushing Eli's far more distorted view of events to the side. *It wasn't your fault, it wasn't your fault*, she chanted over and over again, until Eli gradually relaxed in their arms and collapsed on Oskar's chest.

Together, they carried her, unconscious, back to the bed and lay down beside her.

"Do you think she'll be okay, Hannah?" Oskar whispered.

"I do, Oskar." She smiled at him. "I really do! But just in case..." she pressed her forehead against Eli's once again and took Oskar's hand firmly in hers. "But I'm going to need your help this time Oskar." There were still a couple of hours before the rest of the house would be up – time to make her final awakening easier, she hoped.

§

The morning sun lit up the window, and the smell of brewing tea wafted through their open door. Hannah got out of bed quietly and slipped downstairs.

A short time later, Eli's eyes opened again, only this time they were filled with tears. "He was such a sweet boy, Oskar."

"I know, Eli," Oskar whispered. "I would have liked him, I know. And only partly because he tried to help you." Oskar remembered how embarrassed he had been after he caressed Eli's cheek on the jungle gym. He fully empathized with Isak. They had both been instantly taken in by how beautiful and unassuming she was. Even through all the dirt.

"And his dear Papa. Things were really difficult for people like us back then. And he wanted to help me anyway." More tears welled up. "And I killed them!"

"No. You didn't." He kissed her gently. "You were just a 12-year-old boy, like Isak. It was an ageless predator. You didn't stand a chance against it. It was your first time trying."

"Yes, but..." She couldn't think of anything to say. She knew he was right, finally, but those were her fangs that bit Isak, her arms that held him tightly until he died, terrified, struggling for his life. She cried again.

He rocked her gently in his arms until she was finished.

§

Hannah smelled the Earl Gray, skipped the last step and grabbed the doorframe, idly swinging herself into the kitchen. She was brought up short when she saw Jack already seated at the table.

"Good morning, Hannah." He reached over and poured her a cup of tea.

“Jack! But...where are Mr. and Mrs. Dawson?” she quickly buttoned her top button and unrolled her sleeves, suddenly conscious of how silly she must look in her three-year-old too-small pajamas.

“They’re out on the porch relaxing, waiting for the three of you to come down to breakfast. On the off chance you’d be down first, I decided to wait in here for you.” He winked at her.

“You did not! You just came in for a fresh cup of tea.” She wagged her finger at him, accusingly.

“Hannah, how many times...”

She sighed impatiently. “I didn’t have to, Jack. You’re an open book to me. I have you all figured out without having to resort to...that.”

“An ‘open book?’ Am I really that boring and predictable already? And we’ve only known each other a couple of years.” He shook his head mournfully.

“No, No! I didn’t mean...You’re really not boring at all...” She saw the grin on his face. “Darn you, Jack!” She turned bright red, recovered quickly and swatted him on the arm.

“Ouch! Take it easy, Hannah. I haven’t had any Ejuice for two days!”

“I...I’m sorry, Jack!” she rubbed his arm briskly. “I’ll get you some!”

He grinned at her again.

“You...you...” Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. Everything caught up with her at once and she was overwhelmed: by Eli’s centuries of terrible nightmares still fresh in her mind; by her own now uncertain future, exacerbated by her talent, or curse, of being able to see it so clearly sometimes; and ultimately by Jack himself. The problem was that she was unable to understand her own future with respect to Jack, making it even more difficult to deal with. She flopped down in her chair, buried her face in her hands, and sobbed quietly to herself.

“Hannah, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to upset you.” He put his arm around her shoulders.

“It’s not you, Jack; it’s me.” She hesitated a moment. “No, it *IS* you!” She moved away from him, still crying, and laid her head on her arms.

Jack felt terrible. Normally, Hannah was a real trouper and seemed to always enjoy their little exchanges, but this time he had clearly miscalculated. He reached out and took her hand. “I’m so sorry Hannah! You told me what you were going to try last night. I should have known how difficult it would be for you. Please forgive me.”

Hannah cried even harder. She couldn’t let Jack know what was really bothering her. It was simply impossible. He’d never understand. She didn’t even understand. If she tried to explain it, it would only make things worse for them both. And it was so awfully embarrassing, she

wouldn't even know how to begin. Her present and her future were completely incompatible, and yet, her future was there, staring her in the face every time she looked. It was unchanging, unchangeable, and incomprehensible. If she helped Eli, nothing changed. If she didn't, nothing changed. Only if she stopped aging with Oskar and Eli, would anything change at all; and even then, it wouldn't change enough. *I wish Sava had just left me alone! I didn't want any of this!*

"What's going on, Jack?" Dr. Dawson sat down next to Hannah. She immediately slid into his lap and put her arms around him.

"I'm afraid I made a mess of things, Dr. Dawson. I've unintentionally upset her."

"I'm sure she'll get over it, Jack. In the meantime, why don't you..."

"Of course." He reluctantly picked up his cup and headed for the porch.

Dr. Dawson put his arms around her and waited for her to stop crying. "Take your time, Princess. Take all the time you need," he whispered. "Would you like me to get your mother?"

She shook her head and squeezed him even tighter.

"More tea?"

She shook her head again. "No, thank you."

"How about a little breakfast?"

She smiled at him. "You're just trying to get me to talk to you, aren't you?"

He tousled her hair. "I just can't outsmart you at all any more, can I? You're getting too old for me."

"Not old enough for me, though," she sighed.

"I guess I'm supposed to tell you now that you shouldn't be in such a hurry to grow up, but I know it would fall on deaf ears. You're too much like Eli," he chuckled.

"Do you really think so, Mr. Dawson? She's so much stronger than I am."

"You underestimate yourself, Hannah. You're stronger than most adults I know."

"It certainly doesn't feel like it to me."

He lifted her chin up and smiled at her. "Take my word for it, Hannah. And Eli's Mama is in full agreement with me on this. Eli is lucky to have you as a soul mate. And we're both lucky that you chose to become a part of our lives too." He kissed her on the forehead. "We've told you this many times before, but it certainly doesn't hurt to reconfirm it every so often."

Hannah felt warm all over. Just knowing that Eli's Mama and Papa still felt this way about her, comforted her in spite of everything.

How's Eli?"

"Okay, I think. I... I tried to help her – you know, the way Eli and Oskar helped me after *Den Sjätte* ..." she shuddered.

He raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"It was awful, Mr. Dawson! Her life before Oskar was so awful! And at the beginning of it all, there was a boy, Isak..." And it all came pouring out at once. Eli's Papa sat, open-mouthed, and listened until she was finished.

"How is she now, Hannah? Now that she remembers?"

"Okay, Mr. Dawson. Oskar and I made her feel better, I think."

"You do realize it won't be that easy, don't you? That is a particularly heavy burden, and one she has carried with her for hundreds of years. The scars are deep, and will be slow to heal in spite of Oskar's and your help."

"I was hoping..."

"Of course you were. It's what you do, Hannah." He smiled at her. "And you're completely justified this time. Her secret was almost the cause of her death. And you've quite likely saved her life by what you've done."

"Sava says it was her Karma that saved her, Mr. Dawson; not me. He says she would be dead now if she hadn't crashed on Arrowhead Island."

"Sava has his own unique take on things, Hannah, but one thing is clear: if you hadn't found her in the cave and warned us all, she would have succeeded in spite of her detour." He paused, "But I was referring to what you did last night. You've allowed her to confront her real demons for the first time."

Hannah let what he told her sink in. But to her, it was just another of many events in their lives that drove home to her how interdependent they all were; how each of them was vital to the survival of them all. At some point, each of them had been a major factor in the survival of one or all of them. She went over it in her mind yet again, as she had done so many times when she couldn't sleep at night. To her, it was much more uplifting to think about than counting sheep.

Finally, she thought about Jack and how devastated he had been when he thought she was dead; and Eli's Papa's joy when she breathed her first breath after being at the bottom of the pool for

hours. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “I love you so much! So very much,” She whispered.

Chapter 59: Hannah's Secret.

“What did you say to Papa, Hannah? You’ve made him cry.” Eli plopped down beside them. She couldn’t help but notice that Hannah’s eyes were red, too.

“And Hannah’s doppelgänger just had to put in her two-cent’s worth,” Papa said, smiling. “How are you this morning, Eli?”

“I...I don’t know, Papa. I’m not sure I want to...talk about it right now.”

“I suppose listening to your Mama and I telling you that none of your past was your fault just isn’t enough and apparently, never has been. But you should talk to your mother again, Eli, now that you have no secrets from yourself any longer. Perhaps she can better help you now.”

Help her with what, Rich?” Elaine sat down next to him.

“Eli still hasn’t dealt with her past, Elaine. I fully understand it; she’s getting older. So I thought that, with your perspective, you might be able to help her better than I could.

“Of course, Eli. Any time you want to talk, I’m here. But for a different perspective altogether, Sava seemed to be far more effective at it than I, and in a much shorter period of time. I think he dressed you and Oskar down quite effectively in the cave. He’s a man of few, but quite effective, words.” She squeezed Eli’s hand.

“Where’s Jack, Mrs. Dawson?” Hannah looked over Papa’s shoulder towards the back porch.

“He...thought it would be better if he came back later this afternoon, after you’re feeling better, Hannah.”

“But, I didn’t mean...It wasn’t his fault, Mrs. Dawson.” She fought back the urge to cry again. *What’s wrong with me? I almost never cry.*

He’s sure it is, Hannah. And I didn’t feel it was my place to talk him out of it.

Hannah carefully pulled herself together and sat down next to Eli. “I hope you’re not angry with me, Eli. I really wanted to help you, but I’m afraid now that I may have messed things up for you. You buried those things for a reason.”

“But I buried them for the wrong reasons, Hannah. I’m not sure I would have stood it if I hadn’t, but still it was for the wrong reasons.”

“What does that mean, Eli?” Mama looked at her intently. “What would the right reasons be?”

“I guess there aren’t any right reasons, Mama. I did it because remembering what I did to poor Isak hurt too much.”

“Who’s Isak?”

Eli started to explain, but Papa put his hand up. “Don’t, Eli. Hannah and I will fill her in later.

“Okay, Papa.” She breathed a sigh of relief.

Oskar sat down beside her and kissed her on the cheek. “Are you feeling better?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I am now that you’re here.”

Oskar felt the intensity of her feelings wash over him and instinctively put his arm around her. He felt so helpless at times like these, because he knew there was nothing he could do to help her.

“You’re here, Oskar. That’s all I need,” she whispered.

He kissed her again, but he still remembered the Eli in the cave; the Eli who had tried to leave without him, leaving him with nothing but the false hope that he might someday find her again. He quickly suppressed the thought, relieved that she hadn’t caught it.

Breakfast was quieter than usual, but only because everyone was still mentally exhausted after all the turmoil of the last several days. Finished at last, Eli, Oskar and Hannah sat together on the porch swing; Oskar, as usual, sandwiched between them.

“I think I’m going to go talk to Sava, Oskar. Is that okay?” Eli asked.

“Sure! I’ll go with you. When do you want to go? After dinner?”

“No, Oskar. Now. I want to go now, but I’d like to...go alone if that’s all right.”

He hid his disappointment. “Okay, Eli. But isn’t he asleep?”

“No, Oskar. He already told me he’d be happy to talk to her. He’s waiting for her at home.” Hannah grinned at him.

“Well! I guess that settles it then!” Eli hurried down the porch steps and out the front gate.

“What do you wanna do until she gets back, Hannah? I know! Let’s go swimming.”

“I...I think I’m going to talk to your Mom, Oskar. I asked her at breakfast, remember?”

“Yeah, but I thought...” he shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, Hannah, I guess I’ll just...read a book or something.”

“Sorry, Oskar,” she got up and hurried back inside. Elaine saw her coming and motioned her into the living room, leaving Oskar alone on the porch swing. He readjusted the cushions, spread

himself out, and leaned his head on the armrest. From here he had a great view of the living room, and Hannah seemed a bit upset. He watched them intently, curious as to what they might be talking about that she couldn't or wouldn't share with Eli and him.

§

"Hi Janice! Hi Ryan! Hi Jason!" Eli had just turned off White road onto the path towards Sava's house when the three of them came jogging by. Both boys, perspiring heavily, had their shirts tied around their waists, and Janice's headband was no longer able to keep the sweat out of her eyes. "How long have you been running?"

"We started at the lighthouse, Eli," Ryan panted. He stopped, leaned over and braced himself, hands on his knees, breathing heavily. "Where are you going?"

"To see Sava. You look thirsty! Why don't you rest for a while before you start back and let Sava give you something to drink?"

"I dunno, Eli. What's he got to offer?" Ryan asked, suspiciously.

"Ha, ha. Very funny, Ryan. Come on!" she turned and headed up the sidewalk.

"Is he even up, Eli? Doesn't he sleep in the daytime?" Janice asked.

"Why does everyone ask that question? We stay awake when it's dark. Why wouldn't a vampire stay awake in the daytime? I did it all the time, especially after I met Oskar." she knocked on the door.

"Come in, Eli. And close the doors behind you, please."

"Ryan, Janice, and Jason have been jogging and would like some water, Sava. Is it okay if they come in for just a minute?"

There was a long pause. "Of course. Come in. All of you."

Ryan had already shut the foyer door behind them when he remembered, too late, Dr. Dawson's cautionary advice regarding his tattoo. All he could do now was try to keep his back out of Sava's sight and hope he wouldn't notice.

"Will ice water do? Or is that to be avoided when you're overheated?"

"Regular tap water would be better, Sava, but thanks anyway," Janice smiled at him.

"Forgive me. I'm unfamiliar with the... rituals of jogging. Running just for the fun of it is an...odd idea to me." He carefully filled three glasses from the faucet, placed them on the counter and stepped back, a half-smile on his face.

Jason and Janice helped themselves, but Ryan hesitated, trying to keep Eli between himself and Sava. He stole a glance at Sava and was startled to see he was staring directly at him.

“Nice tattoo, Ryan. Anyone I know?” he smirked.

“Eli giggled, “It’s supposed to be you, Sava.”

Ryan thought fast. “It couldn’t be, Eli. Sava’s not that good-looking.”

Sava laughed heartily, “I certainly won’t argue with you. But what on earth made you do such a thing?”

“First you have to tell me how you spotted it. I’ve kept my back from you the whole time we’ve been here.”

Sava smiled and nodded toward the full-length mirror next to the front door.

“Of course! A mirror in the home of a vampire. Who would’ve thought? I guess you got me fair and square, then.”

“Ryan fancies himself an artist, Sava. And after meeting you, he just couldn’t resist. You’re a sort of...dark hero to him.” Janice grabbed Ryan firmly by the shoulders and turned him around. “What do you think? I like it. It looks just like I imagine you would look if you were...angry.”

Sava laughed again. “Very diplomatically put, Janice.” He pretended to examine Ryan’s back carefully. “The claws and talons are a bit exaggerated, but the rest looks...authentic enough.” He winked at Eli. “You’re a good artist, Ryan. And the person who did the work is a good artisan.”

“Then you aren’t offended that I...”

“Not at all! I’m actually a bit flattered. But I find it sadly ironic that you’re the only one here who can’t directly view your own work.”

“Actually, I still have the original. You are looking at the only copy.” He grinned at Sava, then grabbed his glass off the counter and drank it down.

“Well then! Is there anything else the three of you need? If not...” Sava started for the door.

Jason hurried ahead of him, opened the inner door and let the others into the foyer. “Thanks, Sava.” He hesitated, “and thanks for...looking after Hannah and Eli,” he said softly.

“My pleasure, Jason.” He made sure the door was closed behind them. “Hannah is lucky to have Jason as a brother, Eli.”

She smiled at him. “I know, Sava. He really loves her.”

He sat down on the couch. “Now then, Eli. What can I do for you?”

Eli sat down next to him and put her arm through his, took a deep breath, and... “How did you become a vampire, Sava?”

§

“What is it you wanted to talk to me about, Hannah?” Elaine sat down on the couch opposite her.

“It’s about Jack, Mrs. Dawson.” She looked down at her feet, embarrassed.

“I thought as much. What on earth happened in there? I thought you and Jack were the best of friends.”

“We are! Except...” she stopped. How could she explain what she was thinking? “Jack...isn’t who I thought he was, Mrs. Dawson.”

“What do you mean, Hannah? Has he done something wrong?”

“No, but maybe he’s going to—I think. I mean...”

“You’ve seen the future?” Elaine had worried for some time now that Hannah would someday see something bad that she couldn’t do anything about, and how that might affect her. But this seemed different. “Is it a stable future? One that doesn’t seem to change?”

“Yes! Oh yes!” she buried her face in her hands.

“Do you think it will change for the worse as result of our current discussion?”

Hannah closed her eyes. “No. It won’t change at all. Or at least not so far.”

“Then, it’s safe for you to discuss it with me. And perhaps together we can change it. And if not, perhaps Mr. Dawson can talk to him...”

“No! Please don’t tell him about this. Please?”

“I promise, Hannah. It’ll be between you and me then.” She reached over and grasped her hands firmly. “Now. What is Jack going to do in the future that upsets you so?”

“We won’t be friends anymore.” She whispered.

“When, Hannah? When will this happen?”

“When I’m...older.”

“When you’re an adult?”

“I...think so. It’s kind of hard to tell. I’m as tall as you, but I still feel...like the same person.”

Elaine smiled at her. “As you should, Hannah. Take my word for it. Most adults are quite surprised when they realize for the first time they are adults themselves.”

“Maybe that’s it then. I don’t know.”

“Is that what this is about then? That you won’t be friends anymore? Sometimes that can happen when you grow up, Hannah, and you go your separate ways. It’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“But I want him to be my friend, Mrs. Dawson! Forever! But he ruins everything! He...” she broke down in tears. “Why did he have to go and...”

Elaine sat down beside her and put her arms around her. “Why don’t you just show me, Hannah? You can do that can’t you? Perhaps it would be easier.”

“Yes. I think so too.” Before Elaine could prepare herself, Hannah pressed her forehead against hers and...her future, together with everything she had seen that night in her dream when she glanced back at the forest meadow, poured into Elaine’s mind with crystal clarity.

§

Oskar, up on his knees now, although hearing nothing, saw everything. And once he saw how upset she was, he was genuinely frightened for Hannah. Whatever was bothering her was clearly serious. He reached out to her, to no avail; she was shutting him out completely. He couldn’t even talk to Mom. All he could do was watch. He held his breath when Hannah pressed her forehead against Mom’s. And he waited.

When they finally separated, Hannah’s eyes remained closed for a few seconds. Oskar was surprised to see Mom flash a sympathetic smile, wipe away a few tears, then kiss Hannah gently on the forehead. *How bad could it be then? Mom smiled; at least for a second.*

Feeling a bit like a voyeur now, he quietly slipped out of the swing and headed for the front gate. *Maybe I’ll walk down towards Sava’s house and wait for Eli.* It had only been an hour and he missed her terribly, he realized. Probably because he felt their relationship was in more danger now than it had ever been since before the train ride. And he wasn’t sure why.

In his mind, things were happening a bit too fast right now. All the tragedy and conflict, which he had reluctantly begun to accept as an inevitable part of their unique lives, had suddenly been replaced by – these inner conflicts that he felt incapable of doing anything about. And poor Hannah! After all she had been through with Adrian, and now this, whatever it was, had upset her yet again.

§

“What did I do wrong, Mrs. Dawson? Is this my fault?”

“You’ve done nothing wrong, Hannah. And neither has Jack. Don’t you understand that?”

“No, I really don’t. But even if you’re right, what should I do?!”

“It depends on what you want your future to look like, Hannah.” She paused, then lifted Hannah’s chin up, and looked her directly in the eyes. “You know you could change that future in a heartbeat merely by talking to Jack, don’t you? But I guess you didn’t or you wouldn’t have come to me. One word to him now would end it instantly. Making you uncomfortable for the next five years would be a deal-breaker for him, no matter what he will decide he wants for himself sometime in the future; he cares too much for you to allow it. And there would be no hard feelings, take my word for it. I’ve known Jack almost as long as Eli has. You could end this in a second, and Jack would remain your mentor and steadfast friend.”

Hannah realized the truth of at least part of what she was saying, even as several new futures suddenly opened up before her – all of which caused the second home in the meadow to disappear. The future that had frightened her so much was no longer stable. But if Jack would change his future so dramatically merely at the request of a 14-year-old child, what did that say about his character? She realized Eli’s mama had to be right about all of it, whether she understood it or not.

“But, Mrs. Dawson...” Her feelings were all over the map as soon as she realized that her future was now in her hands and hers alone. She could have what she thought she wanted, or she could do nothing and allow the future to unfold, unchanged. But if she wanted to change her future, she’d have to decide soon, for the longer she waited the worse it would look; at least to Jack, who in retrospect, thanks to her emotional outburst at breakfast, would know immediately that she first saw their future today at the latest.

A sudden movement caught her eye. Through the living room window, she saw Oskar walking slowly down the road toward the Archaeogenetics building and smiled, knowing he would probably wait outside Sava’s door until Eli came out. *Dear Oskar! All he ever wanted was to love and be loved by Eli. And yet all these terrible things keep happening to him and still he’s the sweetest boy I know.* She thought back to that almost-forgotten bike ride before Eli had been shot; the one Oskar had to remind her of when she first had questions about Jack’s devotion to her; long before she saw her future in the meadow. And the truth of what he had said became suddenly crystal clear: He had told her that there were many kinds of love, and that sometimes it was hard for him to sort them all out and keep them separate. And sometimes, one would blend into the other... *Is that what happens to Jack? When I grow up, does Jack love me...like that?* The thought still made her uncomfortable, in spite of her new understanding. She couldn’t imagine herself ever being as grown up as Jack. Plus, she had grown so comfortable with and reliant on their current relationship that she couldn’t imagine it changing so drastically. She was more afraid of what she would lose than what she might gain. And after that first view of her future, she was afraid to look any closer at it, for fear of what else she might see. She shook her head. No, she would have to talk to Jack, and end this once and for all.

“So. You’ve decided then.” Elaine sat back on the couch. “I respect your choice, Hannah, but I have one request to make.”

“What’s that, Mrs. Dawson?”

“Please wait a week before you talk to him, just to be certain. Remember, it will have a lasting effect on both of your lives for a very, very long time.” She smiled at her. “And if you need any help, or would rather I told him...”

“No. I should do it myself. I don’t want to hurt his feelings. I love him too much.”

“I understand, Hannah. And I know how hard this will be for you.”

“Are you sure he’ll understand? I don’t even know if I could, if I were him.”

“Perhaps it would be harder if he were your age but he’s an adult now, Hannah. He’s become used to owning up to the mistakes he makes in his life, as have most adults. He’ll understand, and not hold it against you. I’m sure of it.”

“But he hasn’t made a mistake, Mrs. Dawson. Jack doesn’t make mistakes!”

Elaine smiled at her. “Then that will give you something to think about for the next week, won’t it?”

Chapter 60: Sava's Secret

Sava sighed. "You know how it works, Eli. What exactly would you like to know? Whether or not it hurt? If I was frightened? "

She ignored the crooked grin on his face. "Did you want to die ...after?" she whispered.

Realizing at once she was quite serious about this, he put his arm around her. "It's complicated, Angel. My life was nothing like yours. You were an innocent child. I...wasn't. "

"But..."

"No. I didn't want to die. Actually I gave it no thought whatsoever. I had unfinished business to take care of."

"But your life was changed forever! You knew what you were, and what you were going to become! Why..."

"Because my life after wasn't that much different from my life before, it turned out. Except for the sun." He paused. "And finally, you."

"But Papa told me you were bitten by someone...like me. A child."

"He told you that, did he? He should have talked to me first," Sava said angrily. "All you need to know is that he was nothing like you, and I finished him swiftly and painlessly. In a most old-fashioned way. With a sword." Eli could feel him tense up.

She glanced over his shoulder, where Gudmund's painting of her still leaned against the wall, unhung. An ancient sword was mounted on the wall above it. She knew the only way he could kill a vampire with a sword was by decapitating it. And that meant that Sava had decapitated a child.

Sava followed her eyes. "He wasn't the first to die by that sword, Eli. But he was most definitely the last." His voice was cold; distant; detached.

Her eyes teared up. "Why are you telling me this, Sava?" It was as though he were being deliberately cruel to her. Why else would he voluntarily confess to having done such a terrible thing, unless he wanted to shock her?

"You asked a very personal question. I felt obliged to give you an honest answer."

"I'm sorry, Sava. I didn't mean any disrespect." she looked down at her feet.

He sighed. "I know you didn't, Angel. Sometimes I forget...how far you've come, and how much you've left behind."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. “Why is it so hard, Sava?”

“It has to be hard. If it were easy you wouldn’t be who you are. And Oskar would have been lost to you. He would have died that night you laid your trap for him.”

“But I didn’t...”

“You forget. I was there. I saw it all.”

Eli didn’t need to be reminded. She knew Oskar had been mere seconds from death when he caressed her cheek.

“And that has always been the difference between you and all the others. You regretted every death you caused. And many times you went hungry rather than kill at every opportunity that presented itself to you. And you were small. You had far fewer opportunities than most of our kind.”

“But I should have killed myself after Isak!”

“Nonsense! You were a child! The parasite had hundreds of thousands of years of evolution behind it! It would have been impossible for you!” his voice rose. “Your stubbornness is as much a liability as it is an asset; especially when it comes to your determined quest for self-immolation!”

He grabbed both her hands, squeezed them painfully hard, and pulled her closer to him. “You hibernated two to three times as often as I did, even after 200 years. And Gudmund’s father never hibernated. Why do you suppose that was?”

“I...don’t know. I never thought about it. I thought I was normal.”

“Your own Papa told you why. You need to pay more attention. Only he didn’t know you deliberately starved yourself. And the result was hibernation. Once Oskar and your Papa ‘tamed’ you and your life became relatively stable, you never hibernated again,” he said sarcastically. “You methodically starved yourself back then because you hated to kill, no matter how long the trail of deaths became.”

Eli didn’t know what to say. She had never seen Sava so upset with her before. He was so certain about this. Could he be right after all?

“The only cowardly act you ever committed was using Håkan to feed you after you were strong enough to do it for yourself. As a result, you were responsible for his death; but you knew that.” He paused to make sure she understood what he was trying to tell her. The look on her face told him she had. “But he’s the only one you asked so much of. Never forget that! I would be a saint if I could say the same about my own life!” He produced a monogrammed silk handkerchief from somewhere and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Sava, please don’t...” she wasn’t sure she could bear any more of his help. It wasn’t helping.

“And then, there’s your legacy. Have you thought about your legacy, Angel?” he asked softly. “I mean, other than the trail of death you’ve left behind you?”

Eli was numb now. Was this ever going to end? “I understand my legacy, Sava. You don’t have to remind me.” He could hear the despair in her voice. *Good!* He thought to himself.

“No. You don’t! Even if you had drowned yourself and destroyed Oskar in the process, your gift to mankind would have more than made up for your past. Can’t you see that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Through your Papa, you have given mankind the possibility of eternal life; at the very least, the end of disease and old age. People will now be able to live long enough to shake off the rashness of youth, without losing youth’s enthusiasm for life. The countless millions of people your gift will save from suffering, loneliness, and death more than make up for those you involuntarily killed in the past.”

“That’s Papa’s legacy; not mine. I didn’t do it.”

“You’re his inspiration, his motivation, and the source of everything that’s followed as a result, foolish child! And all of those countless millions will be your children. Your DNA will be present in them all – as it already is in everyone you love.”

“But it’s not my fault. Why should I take credit for it?”

“Your past is not your fault. Why should you take the blame for it?! You can’t have it both ways. You’re highly intelligent. Even Oskar knows it. And as smart as you are, why is it so difficult for you to accept the truth of what I’m telling you? Do you hate yourself that much?”

“Yes, Sava. I hate myself that much!” And that was it, she realized. She hated her weakness. It didn’t matter that Elias’s suicide was impossible. All that mattered was that he had failed. All this talk was nothing but platitudes.

“Do you hate me too then?” His expression was unreadable. “I’ve done everything you’ve done and more, with far fewer regrets. And yet, you’re here, asking for my help and counsel.”

She put her arms around him. “No! I...I love you, Sava.” She could say it so easily, and yet she didn’t know why. Was it because he had accepted what he was and she couldn’t? Was it because he was so sure of himself despite the strange, dark path he had chosen to travel? Or was it simply because he had helped protect her and watch over her all those years? Did she love him merely because she knew he loved her? No, she knew that wasn’t it. At one time it could have been a reason, given her loneliness and desperation, but not now; not after Oskar, Papa, Mama, Hannah and everyone else in her life. She didn’t need to love him, yet she did. It was a mystery.

“How can you love me and hate yourself? I’ve done terrible, willful things in my lifetime—things that you could never begin to forgive were they known to you!” Sava was clearly irritated with her, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I don’t need to know them, Sava. And even if I did, I’d love you still.” She realized her mistake the moment the words left her mouth. Sava never bluffed.

He turned away from her. “The child I destroyed was my own son! My own son, whom I loved dearly. He was all I had left because of my vanity and pride. And he became what he was because I couldn’t let it go, even then.”

“You...you must have had a reason.”

“A reason? Of course I had a reason! He had betrayed me, so I killed him! I killed him because he turned against me!” He stood abruptly. “You claim you can forgive my lifetime of darkness, yet you can’t forgive yourself for your own trivial offence. You insult me! I think it’s likely you can forgive me because you know I can never be perfect. But you judge yourself by a higher standard! Your only sin is the sin of pride. I would recognize it anywhere.”

She grabbed his hand and held it firmly. “You’re lying to me.”

“No. I’ve told you the truth, for your own good.” He was caught by surprise by her iron grip, so it took him longer to jerk his hand away. And in that brief moment the raw, unaltered truth rushed in, despite his efforts to keep it from her.

She saw Sava quietly enter his son’s room, bend over his bed and kiss him on the cheek, as he did every night before he left. It made what he had to do on these dark nights just a bit easier to bear. She saw his child’s eyes open, and his beautiful face transform in an instant into a dark, fanged caricature of itself. She heard that familiar bark as he leaped up and attached himself to Sava’s neck and bit down hard; felt the pain as Sava tore him away and flung him against the wall, where he lay stunned long enough for Sava to grab his father’s old sword off the wall. Sava knew he could handle this small child even with his new strength; he had done it once before on another black night long ago. Thus, he knew without a doubt what he had to do now; he had no choice in the matter. His dreams for their future together crumbled to dust as he swung the old sword at his rapidly-approaching nightmare with such great force that his dear son’s body was separated from his head without a sound, and what remained sprawled on the floor in front of him, writhing and flopping around like a headless snake. Sava sank to his knees, lifted his son’s head from the floor, gently cradled it in his arms and screamed in rage and grief. Finally, after a time, he closed his son’s beautiful dark brown eyes and kissed him on the cheek.

“You killed him because you loved him; because you couldn’t bear to see him endure what you knew he would have to endure. You killed him because you knew he would never be able to do it himself, no matter how much he might wish for it.” The absolute irony of Sava’s tragic choice didn’t escape her—rather it struck her like a hammer.

“Because he was a child! Like you!” Sava said, angrily.

Tears ran down her cheeks, “Oh, Sava! I’m so so sorry! I didn’t know!”

“Nor should you! It was and is a highly personal matter. You had no right to know!”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I just wanted to...understand.”

“Understand what? In spite of what you think you’ve seen, you know almost nothing. Do you think anyone can be defined by a single moment in their lives? That only happens in operas and dime-store novels. Someday, if you survive, you will be thousands of years old and hopefully, a mature adult by then – but I won’t hold my breath. Do you think that your life will still be defined by Elias’s failure then? If you do, I might as well take down the sword and finish you here and now!”

“You wouldn’t! You couldn’t!” She clenched her fists and stared up at him, defiantly.

He sighed, and sat down hard on the couch. “No, you’re right. I couldn’t. I would never make that same mistake twice.” He looked up at her with his impossibly dark eyes, the same eyes that had frightened her so the first time she had seen them. They seemed so different to her now; so wise, so kind, yet at the same time, hard and uncompromising.

There was one more question she had wanted to ask him, but now she was sure she already knew the answer. “You’re never going to take the cure, are you?”

He smiled at her; and with that smile, she finally understood. And in that instant, her burden was rendered meaningless by his own, unbearably heavier one. “Is there anything else? Have you gotten what you came for?” His eyes glistened.

Are those tears? She held him tight, refusing to let him go until finally he bent down and kissed her gently on the forehead.

“I still love you, Sava,” she whispered. “Perhaps because we share a common sin.”

§

Sava watched her walk lightly, almost skipping, down the path where Oskar was waiting patiently for her on the curb. He barely had time to get to his feet before Eli grabbed him in her arms and kissed him on both cheeks. He grinned at her, then the two of them walked slowly hand-in-hand toward the compound. Sava smiled, turned, and picked up Eli’s beautiful portrait, where it had remained, leaning against the wall since he first moved in. “It’s time I hung you properly,” he whispered. He carried it into his bedroom, leaned it against the wall at the foot of his bed, and opened his toolbox.

“What did Sava tell you, Eli? You look so happy!”

She was immediately ashamed of herself. Why should she be happy now that she knew Sava's terrible secret? But she couldn't help it; she really was. Because Sava had shown her what was really important, and what her failure really meant. And she understood for the first time.

She squeezed Oskar's hand tight and could feel his pulse quicken. She thought back to her last night of dark loneliness; the night Oskar saw something in her she had never imagined could still be there, and he reached out and caressed her cheek because it was so clear to him then that it was worth caressing. And by doing so, he had saved both their lonely lives.

She stopped abruptly, took both his hands in hers and pulled him up against her. She could feel his sweetness, she could smell the sunlight on his soft skin, the fresh breeze that brushed his hair gently against her cheek, and she read his deep, boundless longing for her, his devotion to her, and his vision of her as his perfect lover, friend, protector, and soulmate, and finally his never-ending, ever-present but seldom-spoken vow to give his life for her if need be.

"I am happy Oskar," she whispered in his ear. "And I promise you! I will never, ever leave you again. I was so stupid! Can you ever forgive me?"

She felt him tremble.

They stood there holding each other for a very long time. Over and over again, and with great joy in his heart, Oskar forgave her, until finally she had no choice but to accept his forgiveness.

§

"Where's Hannah, Eli? I haven't seen her since she talked to Mom." He picked up Eli's heart-shaped pillow and idly turned it over and over in his hands.

"I can't see her either, Oskar. Where do you suppose she is?"

"Should I look?" He didn't like the idea of intruding, especially when she was probably avoiding them, but...

"Yes, please, Oskar." Eli couldn't hide the anxiety in her voice. She knew Hannah had been upset this morning and she just wanted to make sure it wasn't anything serious.

"Okay." He reached out and found her quickly, lying next to the pool. He smiled to himself. "I'll go get her for you Eli." He slipped out the door before she could object.

He was halfway across the lawn before she saw him coming. She rose up quickly, hesitated a moment, then lay back down on her towel and closed her eyes. It wasn't until he was almost upon her that he saw the smile on her face. *It's okay, Eli. We'll be there in a few minutes.* He kneeled down beside her. She looked more like Eli than ever, especially with her eyes closed; so absolutely beautiful! But he knew that the way he felt right now, even Sava would look beautiful to him.

Still, he couldn't help himself. He put his hand on her cheek. "How are you doing, Hannah Bananah?"

Her eyes popped open. "Be thankful you're not Jason, Oskar, or else..." she clinched her fist.

He gently wrapped his hand around it until she unclenched it and slowly threaded her fingers through his. "I was worried about you, Hannah. I saw you talking to Mom. I knew whatever was bothering you was serious.

She smiled at him, then sat up abruptly. "Oskar! I'm so happy for you! Oops! I'm sorry. Did you want me to see that? I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay, Hannah. And thank you!" He put his arms around her and kissed her on the cheek – and saw her fight with Jack at breakfast. He jerked back quickly, then grinned at her. "You and I are never going to be able to keep secrets from each other for very long, are we?"

Hannah sighed softly, "No, Oskar. And we probably shouldn't even try. But..." she sighed again, shrugged her shoulders and let him in.

Oskar's eyes got big, he gasped, then started laughing. "Oh Hannah! Eli will just love this! It's so absolutely perfect!"

She turned bright red. "It isn't funny, Oskar. It's kind of ...weird. I'm not sure I like it at all! And I'm going to stop it."

"What?! You can't! You simply can't! You're not serious!"

"Don't you understand, Oskar? I don't think of Jack that way. We're just friends!"

Oskar glanced back at the house, saw the porch door open, and Eli run rapidly down the stairs and across the lawn. "You don't know how you'll feel in ten years, Hannah. Maybe..."

She shuddered. "I don't think so, Oskar. I'm sorry."

Eli plopped down in front of her. "Why didn't you tell us, Hannah? It's such a magical thing! Don't you see? It's meant to be!"

"No! It isn't! He's...old."

"Jack? Old? Jack's still a little boy, Hannah. Can't you see that? Just like Oskar is still a little boy. Jack is just tall now. That's all that's different."

"No, it's not! Your mama understood how I feel." She said defiantly.

“Let me show you Jack, Hannah.” She pressed her forehead against hers and closed her eyes. And Hannah was rushed back 14 years in time to the very day Eli almost died when Seth broke her window:

Jack stepped into Eli’s room, where Oskar was already seated on her bed with his arm around her. He 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.” She flashed him a beautiful pixie grin.

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.

They all burst out laughing. “I don’t remember that time, Eli. But I guess I had other things on my mind,” Oskar said.

“Jack really liked you then, didn’t he?” Hannah couldn’t help but sympathize with him. “He was just so cute! The look on his face when you thanked him...”

“And the look on his face when he ran into the door frame!” Eli giggled. “Poor Jack!”

“Remember the night after the first swimming party, Eli?” Oskar was really getting into this now.

“Oh yeah! Show us, Oskar!” Eli grabbed his arm.

And Oskar showed Hannah the night at the pool when Jack first fell madly in love with Eli; something Mama told her can only happen when you're young and have never felt that kind of love before. And she saw how a jealous Oskar dressed him down for it.

"That's so sweet, Eli." Hannah giggled. "Oskar! You didn't have to be so mean to him." She glared at him.

"I know, Hannah. But I was jealous. And Jack seemed to be a real threat, because I could tell he really liked her."

"He did, didn't he?" Hannah smiled.

"And he's still the same person now as he was then, Hannah. He just knows more stuff." She grinned at her. "He can't fool me, even though he seems to have fooled you."

"But..."

"He loves you *now*, Hannah. Can't you see it? Of course you can! And you know *how* he loves you. Kind of like Oskar and I for fourteen years. Right Oskar?"

"More or less Eli, but still it's not the same." Oskar scratched his head. "I mean, you and I were the same age, and Jack's 12 years older than Hannah." He was getting confused again. He still had no idea how it all worked, and he strongly suspected that Eli didn't either. She was just more unjustifiably sure of herself.

"Oskar, I was much older than you! And just like Jack, I knew a lot of stuff you didn't. Like how to speak English without an accent." She grinned at him.

"Well it's almost gone now, isn't it Hannah?" Oskar glared at Eli.

"Pretty much, Oskar." The last thing she wanted to do was get Oskar mad at her right now. "I can just barely hear it. But I've only known you a couple of years," She added quickly, "so I don't know how ... strong it was before then." She breathed a sigh of relief. She had almost said, '...how *bad* it was before then.' "But you're right Oskar. It's not the same thing. He's almost twice as old as me!"

Eli tapped her foot impatiently, "Hannah, I hate to bring this up, but Oskar and I are both at least twice your age. You have to take that into consideration."

"Are you saying you're both smarter than me? And that's the reason why I'm...mistaken?" The sarcasm in her voice was unmistakable, even to Oskar.

"No, no. Eli didn't mean that, did you Eli?"

"I didn't?" She tapped her foot again.

Hannah sighed. “I know you mean well, Eli. And I do take your...experience seriously. The only reason I’m inclined to believe you is because you and Oskar love each other...like that now. And yet you still love each other the same way as before.”

Oskar blushed, “Yeah, and it didn’t hurt our relationship at all, even though I was really afraid it would...” he blushed again.

“It didn’t hurt our relationship at all, Oskar? Is that all you have good to say about it?” she tapped her foot even harder.

“No, Eli! That’s not what I meant! I really, really like it...” He blushed yet again.

Hannah and Eli burst out laughing. “You got him good, Eli. But he didn’t really deserve it. She hugged him tightly. “I know what you meant, Oskar. You’re so sweet.” She still wasn’t sure about Jack, but she was definitely glad she hadn’t talked to him yet. She needed to think this out more, but she was certain she wouldn’t get any more intelligible wisdom from these two, no matter how well-intentioned they were.

“You should talk to Papa, Hannah.” Eli said softly. “You’re right. Oskar and I think this is absolutely perfect...” she glanced at Oskar, who nodded his agreement, “but we could be wrong.” She was sure they weren’t, but she knew Hannah was at least as strong-willed as herself. Why *should* she believe them?

“I think that’s a good idea, Eli.” She was really relieved. She had considered talking to Mr. Dawson, and she was sure Mrs. Dawson had filled him in by now, so she wouldn’t have to repeat all the embarrassing details to him. She got up and headed for the house. Eli and Oskar watched her until she disappeared through the kitchen door, then grinned at each other.

“This is magical, Oskar! I just know this is going to happen! Isn’t it just so perfect?”

“I’m not so sure it’ll happen, Eli. She could decide...not to.”

“She won’t! I just know it. Do you really think she might?”

“Eli, she’s as strong-willed as you. And because of that, I have no idea what she’ll do.”

“So I can still keep you guessing, Oskar? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yep! You can still keep me guessing.”

“And you are still full of surprises to me, Oskar. I didn’t really expect you at the cave...” she looked down at her feet.

He put his hand over her mouth. “Enough! I forgave you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.” He carefully removed his hand and kissed her on the cheek. She kissed him back, then grinned at him, a sudden sparkle in her eye.

“Let’s go swimming!” she peeled off her clothes and dove into the pool. She popped up a moment later and shook the water out of her hair. “That is, if you dare, Oskar. Remember, it’s broad daylight! Someone might see you,” she taunted. But at that moment, all Oskar could see was her beautiful pixie grin.

He glanced up at the rows of dark windows staring down at him from the pure white apartments on the side of the hill, and imagined Ryan, Janice, and everyone else in the village standing there watching them intently, shaking their heads, shocked by Eli’s immodesty, and being extremely judgmental. He looked over towards the bike racks next to the big gate and the Archaeogenetics Building across the tarmac, where at any moment, a family from the village might round the corner and ride up on their bikes for an afternoon swim. But, undeterred by his own overactive imagination and determined to show her he was every bit as daring as she, he quickly followed suit, stumbled over his shoes, regained his balance and, with one last defiant glance up the hill, leaped into the pool after her.

Chapter 61: Reconciliation

Richard and Elaine looked up when they heard the kitchen door open.

“Mr. Dawson? Can I talk to you?”

Elaine immediately got up and headed up the stairs. “You’re on your own, Rich. I have some...housecleaning to do and laundry to fold. She winked at Hannah.

Hannah smiled gratefully, then sat down at the table, across from Dr. Dawson. “Has Mrs. Dawson talked to you? I mean, about Jack? And me?”

“Yes, she has, Hannah. And I can certainly see why you’re so uncomfortable.”

“Eli’s sure I should let this happen, Mr. Dawson, but I think it’s ... not right.”

“I understand, Hannah. And it’s your choice. But might I ask you why you think so? I can’t help but think there is more to this than what you’ve told Eli’s Mama; something else entirely.”

“You’re right, Mr. Dawson. And I think it’s the most important reason of all.” She waited until he rinsed and refilled her fairy cup. “You knew Jack had a crush on Eli, didn’t you? And for a long time?”

“Yes, I did, Hannah; for a year or so at least. And, as she’s probably already told you, I had a long talk with her about it to undo the damage Oskar’s jealousy had done.”

She rested her elbows on the table and put her chin in her hands. “I look just like Eli, Mr. Dawson. And you and Mrs. Dawson tell me all the time how much alike we are. Do you think that maybe...” she hesitated, unsure of how she could say what she was thinking without making Jack seem foolish – which was the last thing she wanted to do.

“That Jack likes you now, and will think he loves you later, because you’re like the Eli he could never have?”

“Exactly!” She breathed a sigh of relief. *He understands!*

“No. It’s simply not possible. Jack is definitely not the type to waste time regretting something he could do nothing about back when it really mattered to him; especially after Oskar became his best friend. But you miss the point, Hannah. Why did he like Eli so much back then, and for a time afterwards, even after he had voluntarily given up any hope for an even closer relationship with her? Do you know?”

“Because she was pretty, mysterious, and fun to play with?”

He laughed, “No Hannah. He liked her because she was strong-willed, unafraid, and quite sure of herself. At the same time, she was kind, generous, unassuming, and in spite of her terrible past, eager to trust. And quite smart. Does that remind you of anyone else in this room?”

She quickly looked over her shoulder, then grinned at him. “You mean me, don’t you? But I’m not...”

“You most assuredly are, Hannah. You two are so much alike it’s, as you yourself like to put it, ‘magical.’ Jack has never been one to pick style over substance. Did you expect him to make a conscious decision to not like these characteristics in you just because you happen to look like Eli? You’re being unfair to him if you do.”

“Do you think so?”

“I do. And remember, you and Eli are exactly alike, genetically. It stands to reason that there would be similarities in your brain structures and quit probably your personality traits, even though the scientific jury is still out on many of these issues. What is different about you two is Eli’s long, terrible, lonely past, compared to your short love-filled one. It may mean that you are an even more-perfect version of Eli.” His eyes twinkled. “How could Jack possibly resist the adult version of you?”

“No, I’m not! She’s so much more than... You’re pulling my leg again, aren’t you?”

“Sometimes I just can’t resist, Hannah.” He smiled at her.

“But, how can I be sure?! It just feels wrong to me, still.”

“It’s because of your handicap, Hannah. Your ability to see your future handicaps you.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you couldn’t see the future, it would all unfold naturally, without being hampered by the futile efforts of your 14-year-old mind trying to interpret properly the thoughts of your 24-year-old self. Have faith, Hannah, that you will remain as sensible and true to yourself as you have always been and trust yourself to make the right decisions when the time comes.”

“That...that actually makes sense to me, Mr. Dawson.” She sighed with relief. Maybe...”

There was a light knock on the screen door. “May I come in?” Jack poked his head in, grinning.

“Jack!” Hannah turned bright red. “Mr. Dawson...”

“Come in Jack! Hannah and I were just discussing...one of her many talents.”

“Oh? Which one?” He slid sideways into his chair, hands behind his back. He was clearly concealing something. Hannah craned her neck to get a better look, to no avail. At the same time, the smell of Lavender filled the kitchen.

“Her ability to see into the future, along with all its obvious benefits and not-so-obvious liabilities.”

Hannah gasped. *Mr. Dawson! Please don't...*

Jack raised his eyebrows. “It sounds serious. I won't stay, then. I just wanted to drop by for a minute to give Hannah a peace offering, and ask for her forgiveness.” With a flourish, he handed her a huge bouquet of English Lavender.

She hesitated a moment, smiled at him, took them gingerly and pressed them up against her chest. There were so many that she literally disappeared in a violet sea of flowers. “Jack! Where did you get these? They don't grow here, and...and...”

“I raided Jonathan's greenhouse. Don't tell him or I could be in big trouble,” he whispered.

“You did not! You wouldn't do such a thing!”

“And yet, here we are, surrounded by the beautiful fragrance of freshly-picked English Lavender. Do you like them?” he grinned at her.

“I simply love them! Thank you, Jack.”

“Am I forgiven, then?”

“You didn't do anything wrong Jack. Really!”

“But do you forgive me?” he insisted.

“I forgive you, Jack. I really do!” *Mr. Dawson, he's just so sweet.*

Remember what I told you. Sometimes you just have to trust the future to take care of itself.

I think I'll do that, then! She smiled at him.

“Why don't you put them in a vase before they wilt, Hannah?” Dr. Dawson nodded toward the hutch. Hannah gingerly took down Elaine's largest crystal vase off the top shelf, filled it half-full of water, carefully placed the huge bouquet in it, primped it a bit, then placed it in the center of the table. The vase, as large as it was, was almost invisible beneath the explosion of Lavender blossoms. She impulsively stepped up behind Jack, put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you Jack. I just love them!” she hugged him again. “Thank you,” she whispered.

§

“What do you see now, Hannah?!” Eli couldn’t contain herself. “Is your house still next to ours?”

“I’m not looking, Eli. In fact, I’m never going to look again. It could spoil everything.” She hesitated, “And I don’t want to keep any more from Jack than I already have to. It simply isn’t fair.”

“I’d tell you to read an advice book or something, Hannah.” Eli grinned at her. “But I would guess there aren’t any books written about this particular subject are there? You’re the first person in the whole world with this problem! I guess you’ll have to write the book yourself. Afterwards.”

“Look, Eli!” Hannah jumped off her bicycle and examined the damp sand carefully. “Einstein! Sit!”

Einstein looked over his shoulder as though to say, “Who, me?” then sat down obediently on the warm sand, resisting the urge to run into the surf and turn over a few stones along the way. He was just itching for another battle with one of the big crabs that hung out near the rocky shoreline where water runoff had worn away the smooth sand, exposing myriads of odd-shaped, weather-worn boulders—perfect hiding places for the especially large ones.

“Footprints! Bare footprints.” She put her own foot next to a particularly well-defined print. “And they’re about my size! I thought this part of the island was still off-limits to the kids in the village.”

“It is, Hannah. But Jonathan’s rules certainly wouldn’t have stopped me from exploring around here. After all, the little cave we found in your valley is old news by now. And those prints look like they’re going in that direction.” Eli hopped off her bicycle and followed the footprints toward the valley. Hannah was right behind her.

“Come on, Einstein. But don’t mess up the footprints! Heel!” After one last glance toward the surf, he obediently trotted up to her side and stayed close as they slowly worked their way through the valley entrance.

“Looks like you’re right. They’re heading straight toward the cave.” Hannah and Einstein trotted ahead of her and pulled the bushes aside, revealing the secret cave entrance. “And whoever it was went inside!” She could see two sandy footprints on the smooth rock floor of the entrance, but no more.

“Wait, Hannah. Are there any footprints coming out?” Eli whispered.

Hannah examined the area around the entrance carefully. “Yep! They go in that direction.” She pointed up towards the far end of the valley, but the narrow, gravelly, rock-strewn strip of the

valley floor nearest them made it impossible to follow the tracks more than a few feet from the entrance. They walked slowly away from the cave until the beautiful green grass once again covered the valley meadow from edge to edge, but couldn't find any further trace. Reluctantly, they retraced their steps back to the beach.

"The footprints look like they came straight out of the ocean," Hannah observed. "And I don't see any others. Where did they come from?" she scratched her head.

"It's high tide, Hannah. Whoever it was probably walked along the beach at low tide and turned in here. They probably climbed out at the far end of the valley and went home."

"But whoever it was, was alone, Eli. Would you have come alone?"

Eli smiled at her. "You're asking the wrong person, Hannah. I was quite used to being alone for a very long time."

"Oh. Right. " she grinned at her. "But not for 14 years, Eli. And you're not alone now," she said smugly.

She examined a footprint more closely. "Eli, this looks like your footprint! Oskar told me how your footprints are different from most kids. Your toes are all straight, because you didn't often wear shoes as a kid."

Eli slipped off her shoe and made a footprint next to it. Hannah did the same. "You're right Hannah. I guess if we wanted to figure out who it was, all we'd have to do is look at everyone's wet footprints when they come swimming. Everyone's been at the pool at one time or another. They'd be easy to spot I'm sure. And we have all the time in the world."

"A mystery to be solved! I think we should do it. I want to see the look on her face when we catch her."

"Her?" Eli raised her eyebrows.

"It's got to be a girl, Eli. That is definitely not a boy's footprint!"

"How can you tell?"

"It's too...dainty."

"Dainty? Are you saying I have a dainty footprint?" Eli frowned at her.

"I'm not commenting about yours, Eli." She grinned at her. "Mine on the other hand, is definitely dainty." She wiggled her toes at her. "Even though I've always worn shoes."

“We should probably look for more clues in the cave then, Hannah. Maybe ‘she’ left something girly behind; a doll or a doily or something,” she said, voice dripping with sarcasm. She sprinted back up the valley, with Einstein right behind her.

§

“The cave was empty?” Oskar asked.

“Yep! Completely empty. No doilies.” Eli grinned at Hannah.

“It was a girl, Eli. I’m sure of it!”

“Hannah is never wrong about these things, Eli. Remember?” Oskar scolded.

“Thanks, Oskar. I...Jack!” Hannah quickly sat down in her chair and patted the seat next to her. “Sit here, Jack! What’s this meeting all about anyway?”

He smiled at her, poured himself a cup of tea and sat down next to her. “Dr. Dawson and Jonathan wanted to fill us in on the latest news, Hannah. And it’s all good for a change.” He glanced at his watch: 8:00PM.

As if on cue, the porch door opened and the rest of them all filed in – and, after helping themselves to Eli’s still-warm plate of peanut butter cookies and pouring themselves some tea, took their usual seats around the table. Jason, Janet, and Ryan sat down across from Eli, Oskar, and Hannah. “Why were you two on your bikes this morning rather than just flying along the north shore, Eli?” Janice asked.

“We wanted to give Einstein a bit of exercise, Janet. How did you know?”

“Ryan and I like to study out on the apartment deck, Eli. We do it almost every day, so we usually notice the coming and goings down in the Mansions.” Janice said, a twinkle in her eye.

Oskar was about to complain about her using the word ‘Mansions,’ when he suddenly realized they could likely have seen Eli and him skinny-dipping the day before. He blushed. His reaction wasn’t lost on Eli, who grinned ear-to-ear.

He recovered quickly. “They’re not Mansions, Janice. They’re just houses.”

“We know, Oskar. Ryan just wanted me to see your reaction to my using the term. He knew you didn’t like it when it’s used to describe your homes by the villagers.” She smiled at him, just a bit too sweetly and innocently, he thought.

Oskar blushed again, but said nothing. *Eli, they saw us!*

So what, Oskar? Do you have something to hide?

What are you two talking about? Hannah interjected.

Nothing! Oskar kicked Eli lightly on the shin.

Never mind, Oskar. You know you'll tell me later. One way or another. Hannah glared at him.

Dr. Dawson waited until everyone had settled in, then “I think we’re going to have a meeting at least once a month from now on, just to fill everyone in on the latest news. This will be our first, and the news is all good.”

“For a change!” Elaine smiled at them all.

“First, the new plane will be delivered...next Saturday.” Everyone looked up, but not a word was spoken. “It will be flown in by our new pilot, so I expect you all to give him a warm welcome and make him feel at home, because he will definitely be staying for a long time.” He paused for effect. “His name is Ethan. He’s Jeff’s younger brother.”

“Jeff has a brother? Why didn’t he tell us?!” Eli exclaimed.

“He would have told you soon enough, Eli. Ethan was already making plans to join Jeff here on the island as our backup pilot. It sort of runs in the family.”

“So soon? It must be awful for him!” Livia squeezed Nils’ hand. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose a brother so suddenly and violently.

“I thought so too, Livia, but he insisted. I got the feeling that he would be willing to take on anything just to keep his mind off...things.” Elaine shook her head sadly. “In fact, he’s already supervising the completion of the second plane, which Jeff had already commissioned.

“But what can we possibly say to him, Dad? We can’t talk about Jeff. But we can’t not talk about him either.” Oskar whispered.

“Just be yourself, Oskar. Anything you say will be appreciated, I’m sure. Ethan knew how Jeff felt about you all and was looking forward to meeting you. And I know it will be impossible for any of you to offend him in any way.”

Hannah was already making a list of things she was going to tell him.

“Next on the list, the Builderbriars.” Jonathan had their rapt attention immediately. “Cooler heads have prevailed, and Adrian’s partner in crime, Dr. Franklin, has been...handled. His lab has been shut down, and all samples destroyed.”

“As far as we know,” Sava grumbled.

Richard sighed, “It was your man that filled us in, Sava. Don’t you trust your own man?”

“I don’t trust them to keep their word...or tell their own people everything.”

Richard threw up his arms, exasperated. “It’s the best we can do Sava. Unless you want to try raiding another vault.”

“I’ve considered it. And it’s most certainly on my to-do list for the future,” he said sarcastically.

“At any rate, they’ve taken our threats seriously since we made the Kennedy tapes public. They’re still trying to recover from that one and have no desire whatsoever to provoke us further. We’ve won. At least for the foreseeable future”

§§

“There’s a full moon tonight, Oskar.” Eli lay on her back, arms stretched out over her head, feeling more relaxed than she had for a very, very long time.

He smiled at her. “I noticed, Eli.” He got out of bed, walked over to her round window and looked across the gap toward the identical window in Hannah’s room. Hannah’s smiling face suddenly appeared, and she waved at him. *I felt you coming, Oskar!*

Come over, Hannah!

But it’s after midnight Oskar! I don’t think Mom would...

Don’t tell her then! Oskar was restless. It had gotten worse and worse the last couple of weeks, and he finally had to admit to himself that things were actually getting almost boring now that everything was going so smoothly. Even school was becoming routine, and the excitement, and even the danger, that had filled their lives for so very long, seemed a distant memory now. He had complained to Dad about it and had received no sympathy whatsoever. “You’re bored because our lives are no longer constantly in danger? Oskar, you never cease to amaze me. You’re all very bright children. Find something exciting to do with your time. It’s a big island.”

Dad had misunderstood him, of course. Oskar sensed that his happiness now that Eli was finally at peace with herself was, counter-intuitively, the root cause of his restlessness, but being aware of it wasn’t enough to change it. He was restless still. He was restless much the way he would be if he had learned to drive for the first time and couldn’t take the car out for a drive whenever he wanted. He wanted to do exciting things with his new Eli by his side; his unburdened Eli. Anything! Anywhere! Any time!

He paced back and forth. *Come on, Hannah! Let’s all go flying. And we’ll sneak out without telling anyone. It’ll be a great adventure!* He waved a bottle of Ejuice at her.

She grinned at him and disappeared for a second, only to reappear waving her black swimsuit and pants. *I’ll be over in a second!*

“Eli! Put your suit on! We’re going flying! He had his pajamas off before he reached his room, threw them on the bed and struggled to get his swimsuit and his own black pants on. He almost ran into Hannah on his way back across the hall. “That was fast!”

She giggled. “My pajamas are on the stairs. I’d probably better pick them up so Mr. Dawson doesn’t find them on his way down for his 2:00AM cup of tea.

Oskar stood in the middle of Eli’s room, hands on his hips. “If it wasn’t for all your lily-white skin we’d look like real ninja warriors,” he grouched. “As it is we’ll stand out like sore thumbs, especially in the light of the full moon.”

Eli snapped the band on his swimsuit. “Look who’s talking!” You’re showing more skin than both of us combined. Maybe we should paint you black or something! And dye that blond hair black too.”

Oskar stuck his tongue out at them and pulled his black wool cap down over his ears. He drank down the last of his Ejuice, turned out the lights, cinched up his small backpack, and slipped out the door. Eli and Hannah were right behind him.

Chapter 62: Midnight Flight of Fancy

They carefully eased the kitchen door closed behind them, tiptoed down the steps and moved quietly across the lawn toward the pool. Oskar hesitated a moment, glanced back at Hannah's porch steps, and despite his attempts to stop it, relived that moment when Adrian had tried his best to take Hannah from them forever. He had seen it himself through her eyes, despite her attempts to keep it from him and, at inopportune moments, it replayed itself without warning. He hurried to catch up with them, fully aware now that they were all following in Adrian's footsteps as he had purposefully carried what he thought was her dead body across the lawn and tossed it into the pool like he was disposing of the garbage.

Eli stood beside the pool, arms folded across her chest, waiting for him. "Well, Oskar? This was your idea. What did you have in mind?"

"Absolutely nothing, Eli." He grinned at her. "Remember when I told you that you're my method of traveling?"

She grinned at him. "So. You're saying you don't care where we go then?"

"Nope!"

"Well, then!" She grew her wings and vaulted over the wall; however, just as quickly as she had left, she swooped back and knocked Oskar over, just as he was about to lift off himself.

"Oof! Eli, what..."

"Look, Oskar!" She leaped up on the wall and stood there waiting for them, impatiently. They both joined her, followed her gaze, and simultaneously spotted the bare footprints clearly visible in the dust on the top of the wall, moving away from the pool toward the north.

"Eli! It's the same footprints as those by the cave!" Hannah walked along the top of the wall. "Why would she do that?" She scratched her head.

"I'd do it myself, Hannah. Nothing mysterious about it."

Oskar stepped on the first print and reached for the second with his other foot, but fell far short. "She wasn't walking, Hannah. She was running!"

"Wow! The wall is barely five inches wide at the top. I'm not sure that even I could run along it so sure footed." Hannah shook her head.

"You could now, Hannah; especially after the Ejuice. You just don't realize it yet. But a kid from the village..." Eli ran gracefully along the wall until she got to the corner. "She must have jumped down here, Oskar. Her 'dainty' footprints end at the corner." She grinned at Hannah.

Oskar examined the corner of the wall carefully. “She didn’t even slow down, Eli. And the wall is 6 feet high! We just have to find this kid!” He peered into the darkness, but as good as his eyes were now, he could tell there was no discernible disturbance in the low grass that would indicate she had fallen. He stepped to the side along the north wall as Eli, who had backtracked about 20 feet, ran rapidly toward the edge and leaped off. She hit the ground running, then turned and examined the grass where she had first landed. “I just barely left a mark myself, Oskar. If she didn’t break her neck, she could have done the same. No big deal.”

“But...you’re not human, Eli.” He grinned.

She glared at him. “I could have done it when I was, Oskar. It might have hurt a bit, but not enough to stop me – especially if my brother had dared me to do it.” She gracefully hopped up on the wall, grabbed Oskar’s hand and kissed him on the cheek before he could get away.

This is more like it! Oskar was having the time of his life already. No one’s life was being threatened, and the mystery was getting more mysterious minute by minute.

“Just the same, we need to find her! We have to spend more time at the pool; especially on weekends. You, Eli and I will have to take turns until we find her!”

“Enough of this! If I’m Oskar’s ‘method of traveling,’ I have to make the trip more of a challenge.” Eli unfurled her wings, leaped off the fence and flew low across the rolling fields toward the western cliffs. Hannah and Oskar tried in vain to keep up with her. “How did you beat her so handily that first day you flew, Oskar? She has outrun you every single time since then!”

“I think it was more important to me that time.” He grinned at her. But he also knew it had been even more important after Jeff’s plane went down, but she had left him in the dust. He was beginning to wonder if Eli had deliberately thrown that first race.

Not a chance, Oskar. Believe me, I know.

I guess you’re right, Hannah. It’s a mystery to me why I haven’t been able to do it since then. He surged forward with new resolve, leaving Hannah to play catch up.

Suddenly a large, dark form swooped down from the south and intercepted Eli just as she was dipping down into Hannah’s valley. They heard her scream, then the two of them disappeared beneath the lip of the valley, but didn’t reemerge on the other side.

“Hannah! What was that?!” Oskar sped up, grew his claws in anticipation, and dropped into the darkness after them.

Hannah started laughing. “It’s Sava, Oskar!”

Afraid that Sava would see his feeble attempt at claws and fangs, Oskar quickly withdrew them and landed in the meadow next to Eli. Hannah dropped in just after him.

“You scared me to death, Sava!” Eli put her arms around him and squeezed. “Did you come to play with us?” she asked, an impish grin on her face.

He smiled. “No, I just wanted you to remember that I meant business. You’ll never be out of my reach on this island until I’m satisfied your demons have indeed left you.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me where she was going, Sava?” Hannah was just a bit annoyed. “I would have told you.”

“I thought I would make more of an impression this way.”

“Why couldn’t I read your thoughts then?” she folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot.

“You weren’t paying attention, Hannah. I made no effort whatsoever to hide them from you.” He stretched out his magnificent wings, leaped into the air, winked at Oskar and disappeared over the narrow end of the valley to the south. *I promise I won’t breathe a word of your...very small infraction to anyone, Oskar. But watch over them! I trust you to keep our beautiful jewels safe.*

Oskar felt warm all over. Sava had for a long time been a dark force to him, a reminder of what Eli might have been. He remembered he had disliked him intently at first, mostly because he never quite trusted Gudmund’s motives or the dark methods he used to take care of Eli all those years. It wasn’t until Sava saved Dad and him from Adrian and the BbC that he had finally come to understand him. And his methods. Without Sava and Gudmund, he would never have known Eli. Or Dad. Or Mom. Or...He stopped thinking about it. It was all so improbable; it didn’t seem real when he examined it too closely. “Now! Where were we?” He leaped up over the lip of the valley and lifted off once again towards the western cliffs. Sava’s ‘jewels’ followed close behind him. Soon, Eli was far ahead once again.

§

The western limestone cliffs glowed bone white in the light of the moon. The three dark but mysteriously beautiful figures, as graceful as they were, stood out like black moths against a white wall – which Eli was quick to point out.

“We’re not chameleons, Eli. Besides we’re not hiding from anyone,” Oskar retorted, a bit irritated.

“But who knows what could be lurking out there, watching us; waiting for us to make just one small mistake, then pouncing on us,” Eli whispered in a ghostly voice.

“Stop it, Eli! You’re scaring me!” Hannah swung in between Oskar and Eli and looked back over her shoulder.

“If there were anyone there, you’d be able to hear them, Hannah. Stop worrying!” Eli reassured her.

“But...what if they’re...something else? Something different? Something terrible and strong that even Sava has never seen before?”

“Now you’re scaring me, Hannah!” Oskar grinned at her, then saw something out of the corner of his eye against the whiteness; something...not quite right. He turned toward the cliffs suddenly and motioned for them to follow. Eli carefully examined the face of the cliff and immediately spotted the cave that Oskar was clearly headed for and surged forward. It was one she hadn’t noticed before—probably because the bright moon was in exactly the right position to contrast the white cliff against the exposed dark rock further inside the cave entrance—and she simply couldn’t let Oskar get there first.

Oskar accelerated quickly and in spite of her efforts, was able to beat her to the lip of the cave, on which he gracefully landed, then bowed and stepped back to make room for them. Eli was only a few feet behind him. Hannah fluttered about for a few seconds, held her breath and, determined not to look foolish – made a beautiful landing. The surprised look on her face made Oskar and Eli laugh.

“Bravo!” Eli shouted. She looked over the edge of the sheer cliff. It was a straight drop of over 100 feet to the ocean, and another 50 feet to the top of the cliff. It wouldn’t be a good idea to run out of Ejuice here, she thought to herself.

Oskar stepped into the cave and let his eyes adjust to the darkness. The moonlight illuminated the limestone cave floor for about 30 feet, at which point the cave walls and floor became the more familiar dark rock of the lighthouse cave. It was there the cave paintings began.

“Look, Eli!” Oskar hurried past her, pulled an Elilight out of his backpack and turned it on.

“What did you bring one of those for, Oskar?” Eli put her arm around him and, together, they examined the first of the paintings.

“To ward off Hannah’s ‘terrible and strong’ creatures of the night,” he chortled. He played the light over the first few figures, but was unimpressed. “They look like the ones in the other cave, Eli. But there aren’t any conga lines. Or pornography.”

Eli giggled. “Are you disappointed?”

“Yeah...No! I mean...” he blushed. “I mean, there doesn’t seem to be anything new...” he directed the Elilight farther back along the wall.

Hannah gasped. “Look! How incredibly beautiful!”

The nature of the cave painting had changed. From crude, earth-toned caricatures of ancient beasts, they became brightly-colored, highly-detailed and delicate paintings of the same beasts and many more modern-looking animals and insects, surrounded by multitudes of flowers and vines.

“Look at the detail, Hannah! We’ve got to show this to Mama!” Eli reached out and lightly touched a delicate leaf, but jerked her hand back as a small flake of paint fell away.

“They’re old, Eli. But the vivid colors make them look almost like they were painted yesterday.” Oskar examined them more closely and realized that there were many areas where tiny flakes had dropped away and formed a delicately thin, rainbow-hued line at the base of the wall.

“How awful! They’re so beautiful, but they’re crumbling to dust.” It made Hannah very sad. Old, crude cave paintings were one thing; their value came from their ancient origins, not their artistic content. It was difficult for her to work up any real emotion over their deterioration. But these! They were so perfect; so three-dimensional, so absolutely beautiful. She could easily imagine some ancient artist ascending the even more ancient cliffs at great personal peril, carrying all his paint and brushes with him and painting these beautiful paintings, despite the trials and tribulations his ancient life probably foisted on him. She imagined how tortured his artistic soul must have been to motivate him to do this. Each painting must have taken days, which meant he either fasted while he painted, or carried food up with him also, on top of everything else. Did he have a wife and children? Would they have approved of what he was doing; the comparatively large chunk of time he ‘wasted’ on non-productive work? Or was there some sort of religious aspect to it all; perhaps a tomb at the back of the cave where his loved ones were buried? She shook it off. “Look at this lizard, Eli. I’ve seen ones just like it near the lighthouse. And these vines!”

“And these little yellow flowers! They grow up against the compound fence, on the outside.” Eli added. “Jonathan’s gardener wouldn’t allow them on the inside. He thinks they’d take over our beautiful lawn.”

“But look at these huge rats! I certainly haven’t seen any of them on the island. I’d remember.” Hannah shuddered.

“Maybe they’re not here anymore, Hannah. After all, these are ancient pictures,” Eli reminded her.

“Yeah, I forgot. They just...don’t look that old.”

Oskar slowly moved deeper into the cave, examining both walls carefully. “I recognize a lot of these, Eli. That spider looks sort of like the one I made for Hannah that night I scared her. I modeled it after one I found under her bed.”

“You did not!” Hannah swatted him on the arm.

“Well...it actually wasn’t under your bed. It was outside my window. But I see them around all the time. Especially in our little forest.”

“So it looks like our artist painted things on the island, doesn’t it? I guess that makes sense. I suspect that back then, a trip to the mainland would be a major deal for them. Some of them

probably never left the island in their entire lives.” Eli turned suddenly and took a cautious step deeper into the cave. “What’s that smell?”

Oskar and Hannah sniffed the air. “It smells like...paint! Fresh paint! Oskar! What...”

“Not only paint, Hannah, but oil paint. Just like Eli and Mom use. I’d recognize it anywhere!”

They moved slowly along the wall, examining the paintings even more carefully. “These are oil paintings too, Oskar. But they’re really old.” Eli was surprised. It hadn’t even occurred to her that they might actually be oil-based paintings. But they were so vivid in spite of their obvious age...

“But there’s no more flaking paint, Eli.” He looked down at the base of the wall, then reached out and touched a particularly delicate-looking butterfly. “This one looks like it was painted yesterday.” He sniffed it carefully. “Nope! Nothing.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Oskar. These are farther inside the cave; farther from the weather, sun, and temperature changes.” Eli moved deeper into the cave, waiting impatiently for Oskar to swing the light in her direction. She had a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“I saw these pink flowers in the ravine next to the bend in White Road. You know, Eli. Where you almost...”

“I didn’t almost die, Oskar. I keep telling you...”

He put his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder. “Shut up, Eli.” He couldn’t stop staring at the flowers. That foggy day in Eli’s ‘almost’ future was indelibly stamped in his mind. He still remembered looking down into the ravine at Eli’s body lying, open-eyed in death, among these very flowers.

They both turned when Hannah screamed. “Look, Eli! Look, look, look!” Hannah, ten feet farther into the cave, was jumping up and down. The smell of fresh oil paint was strong now.

And there, on the wall before them, revealed in all its splendor by Oskar’s Elilight, was a perfect life-sized rendition of Hannah’s English Lavender bouquet, in Eli’s Mama’s beautiful crystal vase.

§

The three of them sat on the lip of the cave, legs dangling 100 feet above the rocky shoreline.

It just doesn’t get any better than this, Oskar thought to himself. What a perfect adventure!

“Oskar, stop being goofy and help us figure this out!” Eli poked him in the ribs. “On the one hand, these paintings, or at least some of them, are plainly hundreds, maybe thousands of years old. And others, probably much younger,” she mused. “And, as near as I can tell, they were all

painted by the same person. The detail on the leaves and vines are exactly the same. We'll get Mama up here to look at them, but I'm sure I'm right."

"And one of them is no more than a couple of weeks old. Oskar? Wipe that stupid grin off your face and help us!" Hannah was clearly annoyed with him too, but he simply didn't care.

He cleared his throat. "And, if we are to believe Eli, they were all painted by the same immortal artist, who couldn't be a vampire or Hannah would have read him by now." Oskar, sandwiched between them as usual, put his arms on their shoulders. "There now! Does that help?"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "No it doesn't Oskar! We already knew that! Now, as much as I adore you and your more...poetic side, could you please stop being 'poetic' and help us?"

Okay, okay." He scratched his head. "Where did you keep your bouquet, Hannah?"

"In my room, Oskar." She shuddered as she suddenly realized that whoever painted this may have been as close to her as her bedroom window. On the second floor.

"Had it ever been...outside?"

She sighed with relief. "Of course! That's it! I put it on the table on our back porch for a couple of nights right after Jack gave it to me, because it was cool outside and I wanted it to last!"

"Mystery solved!" Oskar said smugly. "Our mysterious artist saw it there and painted it on the cave wall from memory."

"You've solved a minor mystery, and left us an even bigger one, Oskar," Hannah complained. "He's immortal, spies on us, and has a photographic memory. The painting is exactly right; I don't have a photographic memory, but I remember the details well enough to know he got it right. You'll have to do better than that!"

"And whoever it was, trespassed on our property and got at least as close as your porch, Hannah. No one, except someone up to no good, would do something like that. We should be worried. We need to tell Mama and Papa about this! He can't be from the island. We know everyone here who's immortal. Maybe Sava is right and the BbC isn't telling us the truth."

"That's crazy, Eli. Why would the BbC waste time with cave painting? For hundreds of years? And he hasn't done anything to hurt us; in fact we wouldn't even know he existed if we hadn't accidentally found this cave. He just painted a picture of flowers he hadn't seen on the island before. He must live here, and has probably lived here for a very long time." Oskar shined his Elilight into the cave past the last of the paintings, where it faded away in the darkness. "In fact, maybe he lives...here."

Eli and Hannah turned and peered into the suddenly ominous black hole. "I...I think we should leave, Eli. I think we should go home and tell your mom and dad."

“Absolutely not! This is our mystery, and we should solve it ourselves!”

“Why Eli! I didn’t know you had it in you.” Oskar grinned at her. “Let’s take a vote!”

“Anyone who votes yes has to go all the way into the cave.” Hannah folded her arms across her chest. “And since it was your idea, you have to go first, Oskar.”

“Are you saying I wouldn’t?! That I don’t have the guts?”

“You said it, Oskar. Not me.” She glared at him.

“Well...you didn’t say when, Hannah. I think I’ll do it tomorrow at noon – with Sava.” He grinned at her.

“Humph! I thought so! Now let’s go tell your mom and dad. And Jack.”

“Why don’t we compromise? If we can’t figure this out by tomorrow morning, we’ll tell Mama and Papa. *And* Jack. I promise.” Eli squeezed her hand.

“Okay, Eli.” She glanced over her shoulder. “But could we please go...anywhere but here?”

Oskar stood up and paced back and forth. “In a minute Hannah. But it suddenly occurred to me that we’ve overlooked something about our mysterious painter that might be important.”

“What, Oskar?”

“Whoever *she* is, she’s either really strong or really agile.” He leaned over the cliff and looked down, just to make sure they got it. “Or both.” He grinned at Hannah.

“What do you mean, ‘she’ Oskar? What makes you think he’s a ‘she’?”

“Her paintings are so dainty, Hannah. Only a girl paints such ‘dainty’ paintings.”

Eli laughed hysterically. Hannah slugged him on the arm. “I’ll get you for that, Oskar!” she gasped as Oskar, without saying a word, leaped off the cliff into the darkness.

“Oskar! What...”

“Catch me if you can, Hannah!” Oskar unfurled his wings, rose up rapidly, banked to the left and disappeared around the cliff toward the lighthouse.

Eli and Hannah grinned at each other, then leaped off the cliff after him. “I’ll get him and wait for you Hannah. Then you can...do whatever you want to him for revenge.” She surged ahead, confident that she would easily overtake him.

The dark shape clinging to the cliff face growled with disappointment, then, with an unearthly agility, scurried up over the lip of the cave and disappeared into the darkness.

Oskar was happier than he had been since Eli had talked to Sava. The love of his life and his best friend in the world were, together, plotting revenge against him. *No peeking! That wouldn't be fair, you know.*

We don't need to peek to find you, Oskar. Our combined superior intellects will do just fine. They grinned at each other.

“He’s probably going to hide in the big cave, Hannah. You go around the lighthouse to the north, and I’ll go in from this side.

Oskar crouched down behind the stone railing around the lighthouse lamp and chuckled as the two of them circled the huge rock knob below him and approached the cave. He knew they wouldn’t look this way because the light, just above him, was so bright it would be uncomfortable for them – and he was sure it simply wouldn’t occur to them. As soon as they were out of sight, he leaped off the deck, dropped down past the elevator towers and flew alongside the road no more than three feet off the ground. They still hadn’t re-emerged by the time he crested the ridge, so he made an abrupt right turn, dipped just below the north edge of the ridge and flew toward the forest as fast as he could, certain he would still be out of their line of sight even if they were heading his direction. He knew he was just postponing the inevitable, but he still thought he could end up ahead in points if he picked a clever place for them to catch him. Morning was still a long way away, and he still wanted to fly over to Arrowhead island so he could talk to Eli a bit more about her interrupted flight – and tell her again how much he loved her.

He circled the forest once, then landed in the meadow exactly where he had seen the lights of their home in Hannah’s vision of the future. He took a few steps down the steep hill, lay back on the damp grass, hands behind his head, and waited. And listened for the sounds of their wings.

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He didn’t have to wait long; in fact he was surprised they could have made it there so fast. The sound of wings approached from the ridge side of the forest to the west, stopped completely for a few seconds, then resumed, as though at least one of them had landed in the top of a tree for a moment. Whoever it was, was now flying across the meadow back toward the Phoenix. But it was clearly only one of them; he realized that now. He listened carefully, then raised his head up and peeked over the tall grass toward the meadow. The sound stopped instantly. He ducked down, pulled a bottle of Ejuice out of his small backpack, resumed his position, and waited. He needed all the help he could get now, he thought to himself. He could feel his heart pounding. He knew the two of them were very inventive. He had no idea when or how they would find him, but find him they would. He drank about half the bottle before he realized it would be a bit unfair of him to drink it all, then shrugged his shoulders and finished it anyway. After all it *was* two against one...

§

“What now, Eli? If he really wants to hide, there’s no way we’ll find him without cheating.” Hannah followed Eli through the needle’s eye and together they headed up the central hills toward the ridge.

“He wants to be found, Hannah. He’ll hide somewhere he knows we’ll look for him. All we have to do is figure out where. With that in mind, where would you hide if you were Oskar?”

“I know, Eli! The Phoenix! That’s where he found me in my dream. It’s the perfect spot!”

Eli quickly veered to the left and headed toward Phoenix Park. “Cross the ridge just east of the road and circle around the park, Hannah. I’ll fly low and surprise him from this side.” She dropped down and quickly blended into the rocky landscape in the shadow of the ridge.

Hannah cautiously crossed the ridge and circled back toward the sculpture. She picked up speed as soon as she saw movement near the right wing of the Phoenix. *We’ve got him now!* She rose up over 100 feet, then dove down toward him, hoping she’d scare him to death. For a brief moment, she considered growing fangs and claws, but thought better of it when she remembered his reaction the last time she did it.

She was only 30 feet away when she realized it was Eli, sitting on the wing with a disappointed look on her face. Hannah pulled up fast and sat down beside her.

“I was so sure you were right, Hannah. But he isn’t here, and hasn’t been here recently either.” She sniffed the air again just to be sure.

Hannah grinned. “I never thought about it, but I guess you know what he smells like by now.” She remembered that night that Oskar and Eli had switched pajamas, and chuckled to herself. It was then she absolutely knew where he was. “He’s at your house, Eli! I just know it!”

“Why would he go home, Hannah? He’s the one who wanted to go flying in the first place.”

“Not home, Eli. To your house in the meadow! The one in your future.” She stood up, spread her wings out and spun around and around. “This is going to be really fun!”

Eli smiled. “You can circle around through the valley and come up the hill after him Hannah. But be careful! He could spot you in the moonlight. Maybe you should work your way up on foot from the base of the hill. I’ll drop down through the trees just south of the meadow. Let me know when you’re in position and we’ll rush him at the same time.”

“Wouldn’t that be cheating? We’re not supposed to talk to each other.”

“No, No. The rules we agreed to were that we just aren’t supposed to find Oskar that way.”

“Well...okay then, but it still seems a bit unfair.”

“Just think about what we’re going to do to him, Hannah. It’ll all be worth it.” They both leaped off the wing and split up when they reached White Road. Hannah disappeared into the darkness at the high end of the valley, and Eli flew east, hugging the top of the ridge and only rising up as she approached the edge of the forest. She turned abruptly north through the thickest stand of trees just to make sure Oskar couldn’t see her in the moonlight. If he was waiting in the tall grass, she was certain he was scanning the night sky for them. He obviously knew they would find him, but he was certainly going to be ready for them; she was sure of it. She rose up just a bit, and...there he was! She could see his blond hair just beneath the edge of his wool cap, and dropped down quickly. He was lying on his back and probably hadn’t seen her, but she couldn’t take any chances.

And that’s when the tallest pine in the forest reached up and snagged the waistband of her pants.

Everything after that instant happened in slow-motion. She felt the sharp branch rake her skin as it got an even firmer grip on her pants. Her waistband stretched to the breaking point and her legs bent back over her head, when suddenly with a sharp wooden crack, she was released as quickly as she had been snagged. She spun head-over-heels through the air, felt a sharp pain in her back as she caromed off the second-tallest pine and, as she gained speed in a tight arc toward the center of the earth, she bounced, rolled and spun off successively larger branches as she fell; each one doing its best to destroy her already damaged pants. Finally, with a sudden snap, an especially vengeful one sent one of her shoes slingshotting out of sight over her head.

After a short pinwheel spin, she hit the ground hard, flat on her back, wings outstretched and legs apart, on the south edge of the meadow. The breath was completely knocked out of her.

She lay there in a daze as time came suddenly to a halt, but she could feel the coarse grass, already dewy damp, pressing against her wings and legs. For what seemed like forever, she couldn’t take in a breath to save her life. In spite of her odd state of limbo, her quick mental inventory reassured her that the damage to her body was minimal and her cuts and scratches were already healing nicely.

Suddenly, she felt thin, delicate fingers – four; no five of them – lightly touch, then more firmly explore her now shoeless foot and ankle; then they were gone. She tried to move, but it was as though she was frozen to the ground. Memories of soulless deep blue eyes staring into hers, a table with a hole in it and straps holding her down tightly, flashed through her mind for an instant, then faded quickly as the stark reality of her present situation hit her hard. A faint rustling sound in the damp grass told her someone or something was moving closer to her; nearer her head. She felt the same fingers softly touch her right hand, then wrap firmly around her wrist for a moment. Still, try as she might, she couldn’t move a muscle. She heard what sounded like a soft sigh, then felt the fingers move cautiously from her wrist to her elbow, then down along her wing spars, moving slowly back and forth in small, aimless spirals as though exploring their structure and, she was certain, their velvety softness.

Like a child might.

She realized she had at least partially regained her mobility when she was finally able to move her fingers slightly, but for some reason she lay still, not able to muster up the will to leap up and flee for her life, or to even open her eyes. It was as though she were paralyzed by her own thoughts. As the fingers moved along her rib cage, exploring the seam between her wing and her side, she could feel their owner's breath on her cheek—and suddenly she could smell oil paint and old leather. Still, she couldn't move a muscle. Something was in the way, intercepting her thoughts, keeping her mind from reaching her muscles. She was convinced that, if this creature desired it, she would never be able to breathe again without its permission.

“Codladh sámh [cullah sov],” it whispered softly, as the fingers of both its hands now gently caressed her cheeks; and at that instant, her paralysis suddenly vanished as though an invisible weight had been lifted from her chest. She sucked in a lungful of air, scrambled to her feet, spun around quickly and as her vision cleared, it came into focus...

Wiry thin, light blue eyes, flaming curly red hair. A boy, wearing a green beret tilted jauntily on his fiery red head, face covered with freckles; brown, weathered leather trousers that tied just below his knees; emerald green, paint-spattered vest, bare-armed, barefooted and smelling of oil paint. His gossamer wings caught the moonlight, sprinkling pastel rainbow-hued jewels of light across the forest floor. He jumped back in response to her sudden movement, stumbled and fell over a tree root, but was back on his feet in an instant.

“You just surprised me, Love; you didn't scare me one bit.” He brushed himself off and adjusted his beret. His Irish brogue was so thick, she had a hard time understanding him. But his story-book, almost Dickensian appearance, together with his high-pitched lilting voice made her smile in spite of herself.

“Who are you?”

“A boy, más é do thoil é [Mawsh a duh hull a ('a's in 'bay')]. I expect the three of you to get it right next time.” He wiggled his toes and grinned at her.

“What are you?!”

“Wee lassies like yourself have been asking me that question for ages, Love. I wouldn't want to spoil all the fun by giving you the answer now, would I?” His eyes got big as Hannah glided silently down beside Eli and took her hand. “Another of you has come to your rescue, then.” He put his hands on his hips and eyed her defiantly.

“I just love your accent!” Hannah just couldn't help herself. “And you're the cutest thing I've ever seen.”

“Well, I love your accent too, Love. The Queen's English is it? From the North of London, I'd guess.” He stroked his chin. “And, if I might say so, the two of you are the prettiest young things I've seen in ages. Not quite pretty enough to inspire a portrait, but still...” He winked at them.

“And I just love your paintings,” Eli said softly. “Mama will love them even more.”

She impulsively reached out her hand, but he stepped back quickly and wagged his finger at her. “Na dean sin! [*naw dane shin*]”

“Where’s Oskar, Hannah? I can’t hear him.”

“Your pale friend is napping in the tall grass. It seems he was tired of waiting for you to catch him.” He winked at her. “Not that I blame him. You *were* taking your own sweet time at it.”

Oskar! Wake up! Hannah let him have it with her best shot ever. Oskar jerked as though he had been shot, sat bolt upright, and rubbed his eyes.

Hannah, what...

Come now, Oskar! She dragged him into her mind and showed him everything. He leaped to his feet, grew his wings and...

“Two pretty young lasses I can handle, but an overprotective strapping lad in love... Is fearr rith maith ná drochsheasamh! [*is far rit mot nah druck/shass/ubh*]” He turned, and with a soft rustle, unfurled his wings and disappeared like a ghost into the forest.

Oskar was there mere seconds later. He skidded to a halt, pulled his Elilight out of his backpack and...

“Don’t!” Hannah knocked it out of his hand. “You might hurt him!”

§

The three of them sat together on the edge of the hill in the exact spot where Hannah had told them the front porch of their new home would stand.

“I tell you, I wasn’t asleep, Hannah. I wasn’t even sleepy. I don’t know what happened to me.”

“*He* did it, Oskar. He did it to me too.” Eli put her arm around him.

“Did he hurt you, Eli?”

She thought about it for a moment. “No. He didn’t. I couldn’t breathe for a few minutes, but in thinking about it, I didn’t need to – until he let go of me.”

“What do you suppose he wanted, Eli?”

“I think he was just curious about us – and his curiosity got the better of his judgment. Just like a little boy.”

“He didn’t talk like he was a little boy,” Hannah muttered. “‘Two pretty young lasses I can handle...’ doesn’t sound like a little boy to me.”

“It was all bluster, Hannah. He was a young boy. I’m certain of it. No more than 12, I’m sure. No matter how old he really is.” She knew no one would challenge her assessment. It was something she thoroughly understood; she had lived it for over 200 years.

“What did he say at the end, Eli? Did you understand it?”

“Yeah. Mama taught it to me. It’s Irish for ‘A good run is better than a bad stand.’ He was afraid of Oskar. Because he’s in love with me.” She glanced at Oskar, then blushed.

Oskar smiled and squeezed her a bit tighter. “But he really wasn’t was he? Afraid of me, I mean.”

“No, Oskar. I don’t think he was at all. You’re not the least bit scary!” She leaned gently against him and put her head on his shoulder.

Oskar wasn’t the least bit offended.

They sat there quietly for a while, staring at the moon. For some reason, it seemed much larger than normal to Eli, and shone unnaturally bright.

“What are we going to do now, Eli?”

“We have to find him again, Hannah. We simply have to! We have to find out everything about him; who he is, where he’s from, and what he is.”

“And how old he is, Eli.”

“And why he’s such an incredible artist.”

And whether or not he’s ... like you and Mom were so long ago.” Oskar shuddered.

“He’s not, Oskar. I know he’s not!”

He sighed. “Okay, Hannah. But how do you know?”

“When I was alone in the tomb with my hair caught under the slab, I remember hearing noises beneath it. And I became quite frightened – because, thanks to Eli, I knew that some of the monsters in my nightmares really existed.”

Eli was puzzled. “What does that even mean, Hannah?”

“Don’t you see, Eli? If vampires exist, what else may be out there? How much other folklore is rooted in fact?”

“Like werewolves and banshees? Zombies, and selkies?”

“No Oskar. Like fairies and leprechauns, like the characters in fairy stories. The good guys! Maybe our mysterious boy is a leprechaun!”

“He didn’t look like a leprechaun, Hannah.” Eli, normally able to stretch her own imagination to accommodate Hannah’s overactive one, was skeptical.

“You didn’t look like a vampire either, Eli. But you were one. Maybe the description is wrong, but there he was, as big as life. And those beautiful wings! Just like my first ones! Just wait until I tell Jack!”

“Which is it, Hannah? Are you going to tell Jack you saw a fairy? Or a leprechaun!”

“It doesn’t matter, Eli, whether he’s one or the other – or neither.” She smiled gently and put her hand on Eli’s cheek. She had a faraway look in her eyes. “The important thing is that he’s real, he’s magical, and he flies...” She giggled, “And, he’s funny, he’s sooo cute...”

“And he’s full of Blarney,” Oskar finished for her. “You’ve convinced me, Hannah.”

“And he worried about you when you fell, Eli. I could feel it in him. He has a gentle soul,” she whispered.

They sat quietly together, thoughts intertwining, until the sun slowly rose in the east. Eli was completely content for the first time in her life. They had made an astonishing discovery that night, and she was still only a couple of centuries old. What did the future hold for them now? Her beautiful soulmate had helped open a whole new world for her; a world in which the darkness she had become so used to was now balanced again – balanced against Oskar’s love, and the light Hannah brought into their lives, personified by the thin, delicate, flaming-haired, freckle-faced, fairy-like child who had chosen to reveal himself to them for some mysterious reason known only to himself. But she knew the reason had to have something to do with Hannah, whose winged portrait adorned the Archaeogenetics Building, and all its aircraft and letterhead. Perhaps that was what had fascinated their new acquaintance. After all, hadn’t he deliberately exposed himself to them by painting a picture of Hannah’s beautiful flowers on the wall of his cave? And mysteriously directing Oskar straight to it? How many others were there like him in their new unexplored world? And how many unlike him?

“Let’s go home now. We just have to tell Mama and Papa what we’ve discovered, Oskar.” *And we have to tell Jack! And Sava! And Jason, Ryan and Janice!* She could hardly wait.

Hand in hand, sunlight warming their faces, they walked slowly down the hill into the valley and even more slowly along White Road to the compound. Einstein rushed them as soon as they opened the gate, took a quick inventory, and licked the faces of each of them in turn. The smell of bangers and Earl Gray tea floated lightly on the crisp, clean morning air, and greeted them as they stepped up on the porch.

The End.