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BLOOD

LEGACY

ORIGIN OF SPECIES

by **KERRI HAWKINS**

CHAPTER 1

THE AIR WAS VERY STILL AND THICK. The sky in the distance was dark with amorphous, swirling clouds. A strange tension squeezed the woman's stomach, compressed her lungs and clutched her heart. She smiled nervously at a passing neighbor but the other woman would not meet her gaze and hurried past.

The woman continued on, glancing about the street. It was oddly empty and silent for this time of the morning. Merchants should be out hawking their wares in the center square. Children should be running about chasing stray dogs or the occasional pig. The clink of the blacksmith should be a welcome background to the musical hum of the crowd.

Perhaps it was the approaching storm, the woman thought to herself. Bad weather made people act queerly. It was evident she would not be able to buy the bread she had hoped to find in the square; the baker was nowhere to be seen. She turned on her heel and hurried back to her hut.

She paused in the doorway of the simple dwelling. It was a poor home, but at least it had a wooden door instead of a flap at the entrance. She pushed through the door to check her children. Two girls and a boy sat at the table finishing the meager breakfast she had provided. Her husband had left early to hunt in the forest so, god willing, they would have meat for dinner.

The woman brushed the hair from her eyes. She was pretty in a plain sort of way, wavy brown hair, full lips, fair skin that she tried to keep soft with tallow. Her figure would have been curvaceous were times not so lean. She was remarkably ordinary with one exception: the startling green eyes that peered from that unremarkable face.

Those green eyes surveyed her children who glanced up curiously. They did not seem to feel the tension of the coming storm and for that she was grateful. She stepped back out of the house and into the street, assessing the approaching weather. She bit her lip at the sky in the distance. Her husband was beneath that blackening sky and the storm appeared to be worsening.

The woman could not take her eyes from the clouds. They seemed to be growing in strength and number, and the storm front now took up the entire western sky. The shape of the clouds was unusual, less like water vapor and more like a churning, twisting mass of fury. As the front moved closer the clouds grew stranger, less like clouds and more like some great swarm of insects.

The wind shifted and with it came an eerie, leathery flapping and high pitched shrieking. The woman looked back to the storm front, a chill rising in bumps on her skin. Her eyes were good and she could just begin to make out the black shapes within the cloud, at the same time realizing the black shapes were the cloud.

“What is that, mama?”

Her son had followed her out and now clutched the hem of her worn skirt. For a moment she stood wordless, unable to respond. And in that moment of silence the ground began to vibrate, then began to rumble, then began to violently shake.

“Get back in the house,” she said urgently, and the boy responded to her tone of voice with a quick glance of fear behind him.

She knew that she herself should get in the house, yet she could not take her eyes from the churning mass of birds that was now taking up half the sky. There were hawks, falcons, eagles, ravens, and vultures. They were birds of prey and scavengers, but more than anything, they were an omen of massive death.

The rumbling increased and was now a steady roar accompanied

by a rapidly approaching cloud of dust. The roar divided, the divisions became distinct, the distinctions resolved themselves into a thousand hoof beats just as the cloud of dust resolved itself into a stampede of terrified animals fleeing from some unknown horror. Wolves, foxes, cows, pigs, deer, rabbits, and squirrels scrambled for their lives. Even a bear ignored the abundant prey about him and instead fled in terror.

The woman was frozen in place. She had seen such a stampede before when the animals fled from a wildfire after the drought. But she did not smell any smoke right now.

The grasp of her oldest daughter's hand snapped her from her paralysis and she stepped into her house just before the tidal wave of animals crashed past her door. She clutched her daughter gratefully, then pushed the children back as the thin walls of their shelter trembled and shook and the dust rose from the cracks in the floor. She pulled them beneath the heavy table, the sturdiest object in the dwelling, and held them close as the roar became louder and louder. The din peaked, then began subsiding.

Her son was crying and she tried to comfort him while hiding her own terror. Although a fire would have been devastating, she wished for the smell of smoke that would tell her the threat was something understandable. As they huddled beneath the table, the rumble faded away and the flapping wings and shrieking of the raptors grew louder.

"Stay here," she said, addressing all three children.

"Mama, take this," the boy said, proffering his most prized possession, the small bone knife his father had made for him. The woman took the knife, clutched her son to her breast and kissed his tear-streaked cheek. She kissed each daughter, then pulled herself from beneath the table. She made her way quietly back to the door, opening the flimsy wooden barrier a crack.

She could see her neighbor across the street doing the same, then saw the crack disappear as the door slammed shut. She knew she should follow suit, but her desire to know what was happening was at war with her common sense. She pushed the door open a little wider.

The enormous flock of birds was blotting out the sun. The flock seemed to stop at the far edge of town, wheeling and turning about

in a frenzied mass. The woman realized they were hovering over the livestock pens, and within seconds, the frantic squeals and screams of the penned animals could be heard. The woman imagined she could hear the tearing of flesh, so vicious and agitated was the attack.

Although she was trembling, she could not help but crack the door a little wider. Something was walking up the far end of the street. The gait was odd and shuffling but the outline indicated it was a man. Several other figures appeared alongside him, also staggering along. She could not make out any of their features because they were still too far away, but one figure paused in front of a hut, and then pushed to enter. Within seconds, screams were heard that just as quickly went silent.

The figures continued to limp toward her and the woman closed the door, peering only through the tiny crack that remained. One of the children made a noise and she turned to them, violently waving for them to be quiet. They shrank back under the table.

She looked back through the narrow opening, the limitation to her vision adding to her tension. Several of the figures went shuffling by her. They did not turn their heads but seemed dazed, almost as if they were sick. She pressed her eye closer to the crack. They wore gear that indicated they were soldiers and they were most definitely sick. All had a deathly pallor, lesions on their skin and festering wounds that appeared to rupture from the inside out. She choked back a scream as one man's arm fell off, detaching itself from the rotting flesh of the shoulder then falling to the ground. The man continued on, oblivious to the loss, and a giant vulture landed to claim its feast.

The woman stared at the vulture. Such creatures were hideous even in their normal form, but this one appeared to have flown from the depths of hell. It had two beaks and four eyes, three which focused on the rotting flesh it was consuming, and one that seemed to be looking right at her. She swallowed the vomit that rose in her throat, terrified to make any sound.

The parade of death continued on, the men, if they could be called that, marching onward in an endless display of deformity and mutilation. Screams and the crashing sounds of a struggle would rise above the cacophony of feasting birds, then go abruptly silent.

The woman watched in horror as her neighbor went senseless from fright and bolted into the street. She was quickly set upon by three men who tore her limb from limb in a barbarous fury, blood and flesh flying everywhere. The woman went still and the men returned to their stupor, staggering away from the pile of remains.

“Mama,” her oldest daughter said, her voice trembling.

“Shhh!” the woman said, still peering through the crack.

“Mama!” the girl said, her voice terrified and insistent.

The woman whirled at the tone of voice to see a man standing behind her, facing her children under the table. With extraordinary relief, she recognized her husband.

“Simon,” she exclaimed, rushing to embrace him. She wrapped her arms about his sturdy form, desperate to feel his strength.

“Mama,” the girl said again, as if nothing else would come from her mouth.

Simon turned around and the woman took a step back in revulsion, the knife dropping from her nerveless fingers. He was sick as well, his skin gray and his eyes dull with fever. He did not appear as bad as the men outside, though, and the woman was momentarily hopeful. Perhaps a poultice, some herbs...

“Lia,” the man said, and the woman’s hope grew with the articulation of the name. Those hopes were cruelly dashed with his next words.

“Kill me,” he said, pleading, clinging to the last of his reason. “Please kill me.”

Lia shook her head, taking a step back. “I cannot, Simon. I cannot. Please don’t ask this of me.”

The man closed his eyes in resignation, and when he re-opened them, all of his reason was gone. He sprang at her like an animal, taking her to the ground with incredible strength. In an instant, he fastened upon her neck, tearing out her throat with razor sharp teeth.

Her son sprang from beneath the table and the man turned, dropping Lia like a bag of stones. Her head struck the ground hard, dazing her but unmercifully not knocking her unconscious. She lay there helpless as her husband picked up their child and swung him by

the heels, shattering his skull on the hard wooden table and dashing his brains out. The eldest daughter tried to flee but he caught her by the shoulder and tore her arm from its socket. The youngest daughter crouched terrified beneath the table, but he dragged her out by her skirt and snapped her neck.

Lia lay against the door, wishing for death. But it would not come and she was forced to watch from her immobilized position as her husband killed and then began eating their children. She watched as the mindless beast chewed on his progeny, hating him and fearing him and mourning him all at the same time. And when at last he began vomiting a green milky substance and appeared to be dying himself, she cursed god for keeping her alive to see the sight.

The beautiful dark-haired man watched his fair-haired child twist in the bed, imprisoned in some sort of nightmare world. He could not imagine what she was dreaming, but whatever it was, it was causing her great suffering.

CHAPTER 2

THE STRANGER WATCHED THE THREE from the shadows. He had initially been drawn to the trio by the red-haired one, the woman who was one of his Kind. He could feel her even from a distance, so vulnerable, so young, yet surrounded by a strange exotic power that was enticing and assailable, asking for violation. She was beautiful and luminous, and upon first sight he wanted to destroy that beauty by drinking the life from her. When he stumbled upon them, he took quick note of the older boy, also auburn-haired with a pronounced resemblance to his mother. Sturdy and handsome, the human boy was ignored by the stranger entirely.

No, his attention was now fully on the toddler with the two. The boy, or perhaps girl, it was difficult to tell, was simply stunning. Dark hair, gorgeous blue eyes, a perfect rosebud mouth, a light blush on his cheeks, the stranger could not take his eyes from him. It was not normally his nature to desire children, let alone one that appeared to be human, but at that moment he wanted the boy more than he could remember wanting anything in centuries. He fantasized about snatching the child, racing away, then bleeding and killing him at his leisure. The thought gave him such pleasure he unconsciously stepped toward them, nearly giving away his position by moving into the light. He hurriedly stepped back into the lengthening shadows.

Susan Ryerson felt a finger of unease trace its way down her

spine. She looked over at her son Jason, then at Drake, who continued to play although he did glance up at her. Susan looked over at the long, black limousine parked some distance away. She had not realized how far into the playground they had moved, and how far that put her from Edward. As if he, too sensed something, the door of the vehicle opened and Edward appeared, his patrician features exhibiting a look of concern as he stared out over the top of the car at them. He glanced around, not entirely disturbed, but clearly intent on joining them.

The stranger felt the other one's presence immediately. The man approaching appeared physically older although the stranger knew him to be far older than his appearance. This one was closer to his own age and perhaps a match for him, unlike the red-haired one whom he could have easily subdued. The power of this one caused him indecision, and it was perhaps this indecision that saved his life as he was lifted bodily from his hiding place and thrown thirty feet across the playground into the merry-go-round.

Susan smothered a cry and gathered the boys to her. Edward seemed to disappear and reappear at her side. Jason looked on with wide eyes, both fearful and excited while Drake peered at the scene with interest.

The stranger caromed off the merry-go-round and landed face down in the dirt, but he had no chance to even roll over before he was snatched by the scruff of his neck like a dog and dangled several inches off the ground. He stared in terror into a pair of ice blue eyes that held absolutely no mercy. The power of the one holding him was tremendous, beyond anything he had felt before. And like the indecision that had previously delayed his movement and saved his life, the huge differential in ability between the two had the same redemptive effect. The creature holding him was so powerful, the stranger realized he was not worthy of the minor effort it would take to kill him.

Aeron saw that he had made his point and in a parental act of restraint that was completely out of character for him, decided he would not kill the cretin in front of his son. He glanced over at the toddler who was watching the exchange with mild interest and no fear, the look on his face so evocative of his other parent it was startling.

That thought brought a grim smile to Aeron's features as he turned back to the would-be attacker he now held by the throat. He tightened his grip until a crunching noise was clearly audible, then leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

"You should be thankful his mother isn't here."

With that phrase, he tossed the man aside. The stranger bounced twice, landed in an awkward and embarrassing position, then wasted no time scrambling clumsily into the underbrush, disappearing with remarkable haste. Aeron wiped his hands on his pants, then turned to approach the trio that was now a foursome with the protective presence of Edward.

Edward nodded to Aeron. He was not particularly fond of the arrogant English aristocrat, but Aeron was unrelenting when it came to his son, and they had that in common. Aeron lifted the boy into his arms, staring into eyes that were a warmer, deeper blue than his own, eyes that peered out of features that were nearly identical to his mother's. Aeron turned to Susan.

"If you don't mind, I would like to accompany you home."

Susan nodded, blushing slightly. It was difficult being around any of her Kind, but Aeron was one of the Old Ones, possessing a combination of virility and power that was overwhelming. And although she was one of the few Young Ones who would ever be around such power on a continual basis, that continuity did nothing to desensitize her to its presence.

Edward nodded his acquiescence to the accompaniment, and the five took their leave of the playground.

CHAPTER 3

VICTOR SAT WATCHING HIS SLEEPING CHILD in the bed. It reminded him of a much earlier time in her life, when he had first Changed her, causing her to transition from her semi-human form into the immortal creature she was now. She did not look a day older than she did nearly seven hundred years ago, and she had looked barely nineteen then. He wondered if this sleep would be as long as that one and he sincerely hoped not. Ryan had slept almost fourteen years while adapting to her Change.

Victor leaned back. Ryan had slept so long because her Change had been particularly traumatic. Their Kind inhabited a unique, hierarchical society in which power was acquired in three ways. Strength was inherited from the one initiating the transformation; the stronger the mentor, the more powerful the offspring. Sharing blood also transmitted power. And finally power was acquired through simple age; the longer they lived, the more powerful they became.

None of those methods were truly simple, however. The very oldest of their Kind could not initiate Change because their blood was too powerful and the youngest could not because their blood was too weak. Only those occupying the middle ground were capable of “reproduction.” The pleasure of Sharing intensified with power, therefore logically it would seem that the most powerful would desire to share only with others of equal power. This, too, was upended by the

fact that killing another in the act of Sharing was the ultimate pleasure, and it was, at least in theory, impossible for the Old Ones to kill one another. Many Young Ones were sacrificed in the name of desire and went to their fate willingly because the pleasure was irresistible, which considerably limited the number who would actually live beyond even a normal human lifespan.

Which was why, Victor mused to himself, his child was so extraordinary. He had Changed her when he should have been far too old to initiate Change; his blood should have destroyed her. If it had not destroyed her during her transition, it should have killed her when they Shared while she was still so young, but instead it just made her more powerful. And although her seven hundred years would have put her high in their hierarchy, instead, she sat atop it because Ryan had surpassed those twice her age. She was arguably the most powerful of their Kind, indeed, even more powerful than him.

This thought gave Victor nothing but pleasure. It was partially explained by the fact that Ryan was also his biological child, something that had been considered impossible because none of their Kind were capable of reproducing outside of the Change. He had hidden the fact that he was Ryan's father from both Ryan and the Others for most of Ryan's life, and none, not even he, had an explanation for such an anomaly.

Until quite recently, Victor thought, his expression darkening. Ryan had also given birth to a child, his beautiful grandson, but it was not this thought that darkened his countenance or explained the anomaly. Rather it was the series of events that had left his child in this deep but fitful sleep. He himself had been in a similar sleep, his brought about by Aeron, the father of his grandson. But Ryan had easily dealt with Aeron in Victor's absence, then assumed the leadership of the hierarchy as had been his wish. At the very height of her achievement, however, she was taken from them by a mysterious and terrifying creature named Madelyn.

Victor's expression went from dark to black. The more powerful of their Kind could see the Memories of those with whom they Shared, and when Victor awoke from his illness, he immediately availed himself

of the gift to quickly catch up with events. He had seen Ryan's sacrifice, saw her led away as a sheep to slaughter, her acquiescence an attempt to distract Madelyn from destroying them all.

And the plan had worked for a while. Ryan's dalliance with the creature bought them time, although Ryan paid a terrible price. It was in fact her pain that brought Victor from his unconscious state, his bond with his child so great he could feel it over a vast distance. And he in turn had rallied all their Kind to battle Madelyn and her forces in an attempt to free Ryan.

Victor's expression changed, his anger transitioning to puzzlement. And this is where it had all gotten very strange. At the end of their battle, it was clear they were gaining the upper hand against Madelyn's forces, but that Madelyn herself could not be defeated. Ryan had again determined to sacrifice herself in an attempt to defeat Madelyn, an attempt that appeared doomed to failure as Madelyn overpowered her and Ryan hovered on the edge of death.

But then something had happened. Someone, or perhaps something, had intervened. No one was privy to what had actually transpired other than Ryan. All had felt Ryan's imminent death, then felt something so enormous, so powerful it was impossible to grasp. Ryan then simply disappeared, her presence just absent as if she had vaporized.

Victor stared at his child, examining the hair that was now almost white. Ryan had reappeared a short time later and it was clear something monumental had occurred. But she had merely made a cryptic comment about his mother, told Aeron it was good they had not had a girl, gathered her son to her breast, then went to sleep.

And had remained asleep for three solid weeks now. It seemed that for years now either he or Ryan had been in this position, one incapacitated, the other holding a constant vigil.

Victor was normally incredibly patient. Having lived for well over a millennium, time meant little to him. But the comment about his mother had filled him with a strange sense of dread. Victor had no memory of the woman, nor any knowledge of her existence. Earlier in his life he had assumed she had been human, a noble woman perhaps,

but someone whom he had never met. He thought it possible he had been abandoned at birth and simply had no memories of his childhood. As the years went by, these ruminations diminished in importance and frequency until they no longer occupied his thoughts at all.

That is until he conceived Ryan. The improbability of her birth caused him to again ponder his own origins, although the birth brought more questions than answers. Ryan's unique abilities and ascendance amongst their Kind, as well as her ability to reproduce outside the Change had caused a subtle disquiet in Victor, one he had hidden well over the years.

But now it seemed Ryan might have discovered clues to his origins, in fact, to all of their origins. He had sensed both her epiphany and the shock it had caused her system when she returned.

Victor sighed deeply. And now she slept blithely on, for perhaps weeks, or months, or even years.

The girl was drowning in an ocean of blood. It flowed into her mouth, down her throat, into her lungs and stomach. It flowed into her eyes, her ears, into her nose where the stream joined with the one flowing down her esophagus and windpipe. Strangely, although the sensation was claustrophobic, it was not unpleasant.

There were creatures here, depraved, deformed, mutilated and mutated. They somehow knew her, and with the comfortable discontinuity of the dream world, she accepted their knowledge of her as a given. It was that same illogic that made her accept without question that she knew them as well, and always had, even though she had never seen them or known of them before this moment.

The landscape shifted violently, but with the insouciance of the dreamer, the girl accepted the shift again without question or even surprise. The world was now a mass of writhing tentacles, a snarled collection of limbs lashing about with sensual and maleficent energy. She began to walk across the teeming, shifting mass, but only managed a few steps before the appendages snaked up her legs, around her torso,

about her arms, lifting her from her feet gently but firmly. She was pulled down into the squirming mass, and the sensation was exactly as before: smothering but somehow not unpleasant.

As she disappeared beneath the surface, she could hear the gentle malevolent laughter of an ancient and arachnid creature. All previous contact with this creature had filled her with dread and terror, but now she was filled with an odd mixture of melancholy, longing, and resignation.

She had sensed the creature before, but it was only now she understood that it was her grandmother, knowing that the matriarch would only wait so long before she forced the girl's return.

The visions slipped away, becoming more and more ephemeral as the light beneath her eyelids became more pronounced. The final wisps drifted away as the girl opened her eyes. Although the room was dim, the minimal light seemed very bright and required a slow adjustment, causing the girl to blink, which caused her the same dream-like incongruity of a thought that blinking was not something she did very often.

She looked around the room and recognized nothing. Although she somehow knew of the subtle amnesia that accompanied the transition from dream world to real world, this seemed oddly persistent. There didn't seem to be anything in the room to anchor her and although she was waiting for a sense of "self" to materialize, nothing was forming. There were books to her right on a bookshelf, and although she knew they were "books" in a generic sense, that understanding had no more foundation than the understanding of the mutilated creatures in her dreams. It just seemed right and natural without any underlying basis that she could grasp. And although she knew they were books, she recognized none of them.

It was the same for the bed in which she was laying. She knew intuitively it was a bed but she had no memory of how or why she knew this, nor any history of knowledge of any bed but this one. And there

was nothing in her mind that made this bed familiar or recognizable in any way. She turned to the bedside table, the lamp, the candles, and had the same sensation. She knew them by name, knew their purpose, but they might as well have been the very first item of their kind to ever exist.

She continued her slow perusal of the room, the paintings, the furniture, the chair at the foot of the bed—and she froze. There was a man sitting in the chair with his eyes closed. She knew he was a man as she knew of the books and the bed, but beyond that could establish no connection with him. She examined him curiously, and again words came to mind that had meaning yet no history. He was incredibly handsome, dark-haired with high cheek bones, a strong jaw and a sensual mouth. Even seated, she could see his elegant athleticism, the broad chest tapering to a narrow waist, one long leg crossed over the other. Although she lacked mooring, she understood these were desirable qualities. She was not surprised that when he opened his eyes, they were dark and beautiful.

Victor felt surprise and joy to see Ryan gazing at him: surprise that he had not sensed her awakening, and joy for the obvious reason that she had awakened. He started to get up, then stopped. She was looking at him with a very strange expression on her face, a look of confusion and slight consternation.

“Ryan?” he asked hesitantly.

The name rippled through her like a small wave, but its force was not enough to move her. It seemed familiar in the same sense as the furniture, but similarly lacked connection or context. The man stood, his concern evident. At that moment, a red-haired woman entered the room, and the girl examined her with the same curiosity and lack of recognition. She, like the man, possessed exceptional physical beauty. Her auburn hair complimented amazing blue-green eyes and fine, delicate features. The girl examined her as openly as she had examined the man, noting the lines and curves of her body.

Susan Ryerson stopped short. “Okay,” she said slowly, “I’ve not seen that look before.”

Victor’s eyes had not left his child. “I think there is something

wrong with your patient, Dr. Ryerson,” he said, his uncertainty apparent. There might have been a degree of humor in the situation were the ramifications not so serious.

Susan moved to Ryan’s side. While human, Susan had been a preeminent genetic research doctor specializing in longevity and life-extension. Her life had dramatically changed when she came into contact with Ryan and her Kind, but she had continued her research out of her great love of science. That and the fact that she now had access to the holy grail of her research, Ryan herself. Although Victor had initially had misgivings about Susan continuing her research, it had ended up a boon as both Victor and Ryan had benefited from Susan’s accumulation of knowledge about their unique physiology.

Susan sat down on the edge of the bed. “Are you feeling alright?”

The girl stared at the woman. She understood the question but was not certain how to reply. Not because she did not know how she was feeling, but because it did not seem her mouth could shape the proper words. The language seemed foreign, something the girl could somehow understand but not something she could speak. The sensation was more than frustrating.

There was a commotion at the door, causing the man, the woman, and the girl to look toward the doorway. A very determined boy, perhaps all of three years old, was moving toward the bed with authority and purpose. He pulled himself up onto the mattress with far more grace and strength than he should have possessed and crawled immediately onto the girl. He gazed intently into her eyes.

The girl stared back into the deep blue depths and felt a shock of connection. For the first time since exiting the dream world she had a feeling of solidity. This boy was her son, nearly her identical twin, separated only in appearance by the differences in their ages.

The world came slamming downward upon Ryan. She instantly knew and remembered everything. It rushed back into her consciousness like a tsunami, crushing everything in its path. The knowledge was so complete and sudden it caused her intense physical and mental anguish.

“Ryan!” Victor exclaimed, taking a step toward her as she winced

in pain.

This time the name had meaning, context, as did his tone and his expression.

“Father,” Ryan said, almost with relief. She knew exactly who he was, the only question being how she could not have. She turned to the red-haired woman.

“Susan,” she said, “I...” She stopped.

Susan examined her with some concern. “Are you feeling okay, Ryan?”

The question before had seemed foreign, now it seemed incongruous. Of course she was okay. She was immortal, invulnerable, perhaps the most powerful of her Kind.

And right now, a little uncertain.

“I think I’m fine now,” Ryan said. “I just had the strangest sensation on awakening.”

Victor was not willing to let the odd incident pass. “You did not seem to recognize me when you first awoke.”

“I did not,” Ryan admitted, “nor did I recognize you,” she said to Susan. “In fact, I couldn’t remember anything at all.”

Victor considered this admission with great gravity. Perhaps it was just a temporary by-product of the severe mental and physical demands that had been placed upon her. Susan echoed this line of thought.

“Between the tortures you suffered in captivity and then the aftermath,” Susan said, “I’m not surprised if you have some lingering ill effects. Still,” Susan said, suddenly business-like, “I’m going to have to insist on a full physical exam as soon as you’re up and around.”

Ryan turned to Drake, the usual twinkle in her eye appearing. “She’ll come up with any excuse to use me in her research.”

Victor was relieved to see the child he knew returning, her irrepressible humor and charm manifesting in full force. And although Susan did her best to frown at the gibe, she could barely hide her smile.

Ryan sat up gingerly, testing her limbs, and was relieved to see everything in working order.

“I would like to clean up a bit,” she said to Victor, “then I will

join you in the study. After that," she said, turning to Susan, "I will happily be your lab rat."

Victor turned as Ryan entered, pleased to see she carried herself with her usual lithe grace. The disquiet he felt upon her initial awakening had dissipated. She carried Drake upon her back and he clung to her neck, holding himself without requiring her support. She slung him around, then set him down. No sooner did his feet touch the ground than he raced to a pile of children's books, returning with one of his favorites. Ryan examined the book with mock seriousness.

"You're going to read to me about this cat and its hat?"

"Yes!" Drake exclaimed happily. Ryan was pleased to hear him speak aloud. Her mental bond with her son was so great that most times they did not need speech to communicate. He was actually quite articulate for his age and engaged in animated conversation with others, especially Jason. Ryan had to remind herself not to neglect that part of his development.

He handed her the book, then quickly returned with another one. "This one has a bear," he said with some authority, "who likes honey."

"Ah," Ryan said, "I see." He passed this book to her as well, then procured another one. This tome was quite different, however. It was thick and appeared very, very old. It was also very heavy although Drake had no difficulty carrying it.

"This one is too hard," Drake said, "even for Jason."

A shadow flitted across Ryan's face as she looked at the book. It was the story of King Arthur, one of the very first books ever printed, and it was most likely priceless. Victor had given it to her as a gift centuries before. She took the ancient text from the small boy's hands.

"Then I will read this one to you," Ryan said, "after you read to me about the bear."

Drake seemed pleased with this arrangement, but the books would have to wait. Edward entered, reminding Ryan that her son

required food even though she did not.

“Master Jason awaits your presence at the kitchen table, Master Drake.”

Food pleased Drake as much as the promise of reading, although it was clear he wanted to stay with his mother. Ryan picked him up, tossed him into the air, then handed him off to her manservant. “You go eat,” Ryan said, “we’ll read after Dr. Ryerson is done with me.”

The two disappeared and Ryan turned back to her father. The book had stirred up a vortex of memories, some recent, some ancient, most not even hers.

“What’s wrong?” Victor asked, assessing her shift in mood.

Ryan stared down at the book in her hands. There was so much to tell her father, so much information that had flooded into her consciousness. But much of it would be difficult to explain because what she had learned she had also actually experienced, making it even more challenging to sort out. One of Ryan’s greatest gifts was to see through the eyes of others, experiencing their thoughts and memories as if they were her own. It was an extremely disorienting ability, though, as she constantly had the sensation of remembering things that had never happened to her and recalling events she had never been a part of. When she was inundated with information, as had so recently occurred, she had difficulty separating what was her reality and what belonged to someone else.

“It was my intent,” Ryan said slowly, “to give you my blood. It would be the simplest way to show you what I’ve seen.”

“But you’re having second thoughts after your temporary memory loss,” Victor deduced.

Ryan bit her lip, careful not to draw blood because its presence would most likely eliminate any restraint either of them possessed. “I took Madelyn’s blood, and—,” Ryan hesitated, at a loss for words. “and someone else’s,” she finished lamely. “I cannot know what effect this has had on me.”

Victor was silent. He wanted more than anything to lift her up and fasten himself on her neck. Not only would it give him knowledge, it would give her strength, not to mention incomparable pleasure to

both of them. But he knew she was right.

“The other one you Shared with,” he stopped, the words and their meaning too monumental for him to formulate. He braced himself, then continued. “That was that my mother?”

“Yes,” Ryan said simply. “I believe it was.”

Victor stared at his child. There was a horrible breadth of knowledge in her eyes, an understanding so deep and painful he knew that words would be inadequate to communicate it.

“She wasn’t human,” he said quietly, “was she?”

“No,” Ryan said, “she was not even of this world.” Ryan glanced down at the tome she still held in her hands and a slight smile drifted across her features. “Your father, on the other hand, was quite human, and quite extraordinary.”

This startled Victor. For whatever reason, it had not even occurred to him to ask about his father. He was about to ask for more detail when he noticed that Ryan had become very pale. The book slipped from her hands and her knees buckled. A look of pain flashed in her eyes and she would have collapsed had not Victor sprang to her side.

“Ryan,” he said urgently, but her eyes were unfocused and she did not respond. He did not hesitate, but gathered her into his arms to take her to the best doctor he knew.

CHAPTER 4

LIA WISHED FOR DEATH, but death would not come. Cruelly, she lay there for days while the stink of her husband and children grew noxious, then unbearable. It was not hunger or pain that finally drove her from her shelter, but rather the putrid smell of death.

She crawled from her hut, pushing open the door she had been so proud of, the door that had offered her no protection from the parade of horror that had passed by her home. She crawled out into the smoldering ruins of her village to find herself the only survivor of the once thriving town.

She staggered to her feet. The scavengers, both human and avian, had moved on. All that was left were thick swarms of flies that hovered about the dead, feeding from them then leaving their eggs in the rotting carcasses. She stumbled toward the well, briefly wondering if it was contaminated, a thought which caused her to collapse at its edge in bitter laughter. It took a moment for her to regain control, and then she pulled herself weakly up onto the brick retaining wall.

The water level was high and she was able to lean and scoop from its surface. She drank greedily, the stagnant water the most refreshing thing she had ever tasted. She splashed water over her face, then down her throat, washing the blood from the wound that should have killed her.

The water in the well stilled, its surface becoming smooth and

placid once more. The sun was at an angle that created a mirror-like reflection of the surface. Lia became very still as she caught sight of her image in the water. She leaned down in disbelief.

Her skin had taken on a leathery appearance. She leaned closer, touching her hand to her cheek. It was smooth and supple, more so than it had been before. There were tiny, repetitive patterns that looked much like scales. Lia looked down at her body. Her upper arms had taken on the same pattern, stopping about halfway above her elbows. She ripped open her shirt, exposing her cleavage. The scaliness had spread down her breasts to just above the nipple, about the same distance it had traveled down her arm.

Lia again gazed at her reflection. She realized the rash had originated from the wound in her neck and was spreading in both directions. It covered her face and head first because of their proximity to the wound, but now it was spreading down her body. She stared at her arms in horror, imagining she could see the rash spreading before her eyes.

A harsh, guttural comment behind her caused her to leap to her feet and clutch her shirt to her breasts. She did not understand the language but the disdain in the voice was clearly communicated.

Two men and a woman were standing before her, impossibly tall and dressed in the strangest clothing. One man had a deep scar across his face and the other appeared older, more refined. Both wore expressions of cruelty on their faces, expressions so habitual they had worn grooves deep into the skin. And yet somehow neither was as frightening as the woman whose striking features were untouched by time or expression, whose gaze was completely dispassionate. All three examined Lia closely, talking amongst themselves in the harsh language Lia did not understand. They seemed surprised to see her in the ruins of the town, but less surprised at the bizarre changes in her skin-tone. One of the males grasped her brutally by the arm and yanked her shirt open, causing her breasts to spill out. Lia blushed crimson with shame, but the attention the three gave her was less lascivious than clinical. There seemed to be some disagreement, with the female dismissing Lia, but one of the males maintaining interest. Finally there seemed to be

some sort of compromise as the female shrugged and walked off. The male turned back to Lia and with one motion stripped the dress from her. He examined her fully and this time Lia sensed more ill intent in his perusal, now that he was no longer within the view of the female.

Lia did not have time to assess the danger of this attention because the man pierced her skin with a sharp object, and blessedly, everything went black.

Susan leaped up when Victor came into the lab carrying Ryan. She knew immediately that something was wrong, both by Victor's expression and by the limp form he carried in his arms. She swept the paperwork from the examination table to make room for the motionless figure that Victor gently set down. Edward came in the door behind them, having instantly sensed his master's distress.

Ryan was not unconscious. Her eyes were open, but she did not appear to be aware of any of them. She was very pale and her skin was abnormally cool to the touch. Susan placed her hand upon Ryan's forehead. Although Ryan's body temperature could vary wildly, this was extreme even for her. Her eyes were dark with exhaustion.

"What happened?" Susan asked.

"I'm not certain," Victor said. "She was standing there talking, then just collapsed."

Susan shined a light in Ryan's eyes, noting the near-instantaneous pupil reactivity normal to Ryan. "I've seen her like this before," Susan said. "When we were imprisoned, Madelyn would bleed Ryan almost completely. It would take days for her to recover. But this," she said, waving her hand in front of Ryan in an attempt to get her attention, "this is new."

The motion finally appeared to have the desired effect and Ryan slowly focused on Susan. Susan was relieved to see recognition in her eyes.

"How did I get here?"

"We were in the study, talking," Victor said, "then it seemed like

you just faded away. It was almost as if you fainted, but without losing consciousness.”

Ryan shifted on the table, then pushed to an upright position. The maneuver seemed to require a great deal of effort on her part. “I feel,” she stopped, unsure exactly what she was feeling. “I feel weak right now.”

Susan eyed her uncertainly. When she had been human she would have taken this statement at face value, but now that she possessed preternatural senses, the statement seemed quite impossible. She could feel the power emanating outward from Ryan and it had not diminished in any way, regardless of what Ryan was feeling. Susan turned to Victor.

“Do you feel anything different about her?”

Victor shook his head. “No, she feels exactly like an Old One, powerful beyond her years.”

Edward eyed his master with apprehension. Although Ryan often seemed oblivious to her abilities, she had never expressed a feeling so at odds with the reality. The creature sitting before him possessed unbelievable power, yet seemed to have difficulty sitting upright.

“I’m going to run some tests on you,” Susan said. “Fortunately I have a lot of baseline information on your anatomy, so I can do some comparisons.”

Ryan sighed and reclined once more. All she wanted to do right now was sleep.

“And so this bear and this little pig, they are friends?”

Susan watched Ryan from the doorway. Drake was curled up in her arm and was reading to her slowly and methodically, his diction quite advanced for one so young. Ryan was in her bed once more, propped up on a mountain of pillows, her fatigue obvious. Susan quietly shut the door, certain that Ryan would be asleep long before the animals finished their quest. She turned and stifled a cry as she nearly ran into Edward. He motioned for her to follow him, and they

joined Victor in the study.

Victor sat staring into the fire, a glass of red wine untouched at his elbow. This changed when the two entered. He lifted the glass to his lips and drained it in a single drink, setting it back down on the side table. Edward grasped the decanter on the table and refilled the glass. He filled a second glass and offered it to Susan, who thought about refusing, then accepted, taking a long drink herself. Then Edward, who although always allowed, never presumed, did exactly that and poured himself a glass, also downing it in a single drink.

Victor turned from the fire to Susan. "Well, Dr. Ryerson?"

"Ryan's resting and is probably already asleep again. I'm not surprised it's taking some time for her to recover. Even as strong as she is, she's been through some pretty horrifying things. So her weakness is not that unexpected. But the memory loss?" Susan paused, also considering Ryan's brief period of unresponsiveness. "I don't really know what to think about that." Susan took another long drink of her wine. "Now that Ryan is settled I'm going back to my lab and start analyzing the blood work."

Susan thought back to the earlier examination. Simply obtaining the sample had been an adventure since Ryan's skin was almost impenetrable and the sight of blood excited a predatory response in all of them, including Susan. It was at times like that she had to muster all of her professionalism to complete even the most mundane act.

"But you must have a theory," Victor said, pressing her, "you always have a theory."

Susan started to deny this possibility, then relented. Edward topped off her glass as she settled into the chair opposite Victor.

"I don't know how much Ryan has told you about our captivity."

"Not a great deal," Victor said. "I've had little opportunity to speak with her since she was returned to us."

"But you know of Madelyn."

Victor's expression grew black. "Yes," he said coldly, "I know a little of her. I had the pleasure of meeting her when she briefly returned to parade Ryan before us, and I know her from Abigail's memories, as well as those of my grandson."

Susan unconsciously shivered. “Madelyn bled Ryan regularly, injecting her with some type of neurotoxin to do so. Ryan swore she would not take Madelyn’s blood, but I think that is exactly what she did at the end in an attempt to defeat her. Such a union would put unimaginable stress on Ryan’s system.”

“So you think that Madelyn has infected Ryan with some sort of disease?”

Susan was uncertain. “It is possible. It’s too early for me to tell. She may just have weakened her. But I think Ryan is probably wise in her restraint on Sharing blood right now. If anyone can adapt to the attack on her system, it will be her.”