ꕥ Chapter 6 ꕥ
Sylvio: Ammit

Antone and I were playing chess. I didn't lose as spectacularly as I used to, but I was still no match for him. It was odd to feel happiness and peace from him instead of burning anger over the injustices he'd suffered. I wished there were some way to relieve Tim and Sylvio of their own burdens of painful memories and guilt.

Lucas came in the room and watched us for a bit, then decided to rub my shoulders. He was quite talented at massage . . . and other things. I closed my eyes and moaned with pleasure.

"I can make her do that in the bedroom, too, but not for the same reason," Lucas remarked.

It was near the end of our week with Sylvio. All of us living in the house were more than ready for adventures in bed. I turned to Lucas, knowing he could see the lust in my eyes. "Promise?" I said.

"You bet." He grinned wolfishly at me then nodded at Antone, who felt amused. "Can I catch a game next time you're hanging around?" Lucas asked.

"When you're not too preoccupied," Antone purred. His voice was always seductive, and he was largely unaware that it was.

"Deal." Lucas bent and kissed my cheek. "Later."

"See you soon," I said as he walked away.

"Counting on it," he said, then added, "Don't take too long beating her at the game."

It was times like that when I wished I was quick with a comeback. All I could think to say was, "Hey!" in an aggrieved tone.

Antone chuckled and moved his bishop to take out my rook. I sighed. It was always hard to concentrate when Sylvio's blood raged through me, and Lucas had not helped. I searched for something to distract Antone from the game.

"Did Sylvio own slaves?" I asked.

I knew Sylvio had bought Antone, but I'd never asked if that was something he did as a matter of course in those days.

Antone raised an eyebrow and regarded me for a few seconds. A small smile played on his lips. I suspected he knew why I'd asked. "You don't think the people he and I keep now are slaves?"

I sniffed at him. "You know what I mean." He was right. The people kept by vampires are slaves, even if some agreed to be captives, but it wasn't what I wanted an answer to.

"Yes," Antone said, "he did." He waited to go on and enjoyed the surprise and dismay he felt from me. Then he added, "After coming to America, he owned several slaves over the years who weren't kept for him to feed from. He'd buy them for one reason or another, usually due to sentiment. Then he'd take them north and let them go."

I slapped his arm for making me doubt Sylvio, which brought out another chuckle from him. It made me feel warm inside. His voice was mesmerizing, and the good mood he carried with him now was refreshing. But my ploy was not working; I was much more distracted than he was.

"The result was that he had very loyal employees for his own business enterprises," Antone added.

That gave me a new thing to think about. I wondered if Sylvio had plotted things that way, or if it was simply a nice consequence. "Why did he keep you enthralled, then?"

I had unexpectedly hit a subject that served to distract Antone completely. His eyes took on the same look I often saw in Sylvio's as memories came to the fore.

"I still marvel at what Patrick did . . . what you did . . . for me," he said. He put a hand over mine and gently squeezed. "Thoughts of the past used to make me so angry, but now I can look

back objectively."

He leaned back in his chair and picked up a pawn, fiddling with it as he spoke. "My mind was unstable when Sylvio bought me. There isn't much I remember clearly about those first few weeks. We'd been at his estate for several days before I began to think coherently, only to discover I was captured by him far more completely than my former owner, even with her power as a witch. I've resented his hold on me all these years." He shook his head. "Now it seems like such a petty waste of time, especially since you emailed me his story—the parts you've typed up so far."

I was right in my guess that Antone had never asked Sylvio about his past. I sent him what I had transcribed after my recent visit to his building in New York City.

"Thank you for that," Antone said. "I understand now why slavery is appalling to him, and why he fights so hard to deny giving the demon what it desires."

"Glad I could help." I spotted something on the chess board I hadn't noticed until then. I moved my knight and said triumphantly, "Check."

Antone sat up and chuckled once more, then we continued our game. He won, of course, but not quite as easily as usual. Afterward, I went to find Lucas. When my body's lust was sated, I took out my laptop and started on the next part of Sylvio's story, eager to find out more about Cyneric.

℘ Sylvio ☙

Cyneric tried to carry on with his life. We spent the first few months living and working at the estate as though nothing had changed. He was confined to working only at night, and Gerald took care of things during the day. I spent my days impatient for him to wake up, and stewed for hours trying to figure out how to free him from lying still and dead during daylight. But Cyneric wasn't human anymore. The humans who were friends of his weren't enthralled by him, so they feared him, and he began to resent them.

There was a lot to feed that resentment. The humans at Niveus might have been my captives, enthralled by my spell, but they had far more freedom than he did. Immense strength, immunity to disease, immortality—to a mortal, those might seem wonderful gifts. But the cost is being a slave to desire. Our need for blood, sex, and bringing death is never-ending. The scent of a human is intoxicating. The beat of their hearts mesmerizes us. Even today, I often sit at the dinner table, appearing at my ease as my humans talk among themselves about their day, and become lost in that primal need.

At that time, I did not keep men fully enthralled as I began to later. It was only the women that I used to satiate my body's need. Since my blood drives them to a wanton desire for sex, they were free to satisfy themselves with any of the men at the estate who wished to join with them.

Cyneric had not indulged himself in that way. Nyla was fiercely possessive, and he loved his wife with all his soul. He never dallied with other women since marrying her. He believed in the teachings of Christ. He and his family attended church in Brycgstow with regularity, and Cyneric truly embraced those ideals. I did not prevent my people from practicing their religion, whichever one they believed in, as long as they obeyed me and didn't plot my ruin. If I'd kept them as mine before they became believers, their faith did not weaken or harm me.

Now, according to the teaching of his church, Cyneric was damned to Hell. He was the spawn of a demon, driven to commit nearly every sin condemned by the commandments he once tried to abide by.

As a mortal man, his days had been occupied from sunup to sundown with the affairs of the estate. His evenings were spent in the company of his family and friends, his nights in his wife's embrace.

I thought I lost everything when I'd been taken as a slave for Adonas. But I was young. I'd never fallen in love or had a family of my own. There wasn't a religion that I embraced. What was stolen from me was only the promise of a full life. Cyneric had already experienced those things. At that

time, I grieved for him, thinking he'd lost far more than I. Now, I'm not so sure. Which is the greater tragedy—to be torn from your mortal life before you've really ever lived, or to be torn from a rich life full of family, friends, and true love?

I don't have an answer for that.

It wasn't long before I realized Cyneric could not stay at Niveus. The anger and resentment he felt were beginning to consume him. He became almost violent when he would take the women to his bed, and his hunger could not be quenched. He would spend hours with the women, and the rest of the time he prowled the estate and woods, hunting animals. He always took more blood than his body needed, although he did still have the control to stop before he cost the humans their lives.

When he wasn't in pursuit of either blood or sex, he would sit and brood. When vampires are not trying to pretend to be human, we can stand in any position we desire, as still as stone statues, and that disturbs humans even more than the sight of our fangs. When any of the humans spotted him, they'd go out of their way to avoid him. His mood infected the whole estate. A gray cloud of doom lay over all of Niveus.

After six months, I was past feeling sorry for him. He was perched on the top of the entrance to the castle courtyard with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. He looked like a gargoyle, hunched over as he was. I was riding Lucifer through the gate and reached up and knocked Cyneric off. He fell onto the flagstones with a crash, then jumped to his feet so fast Lucifer started and leaped sideways, nearly unseating me.

"What?" Cyneric snarled.

He was always too polite around me; a snarl was progress. "I've had enough of you pouting. It's time to get on with living. I've indulged you while you licked your wounds, but I'm done with it."

"I don't pout," he growled petulantly.

I looked at Gerald, who was standing nearby, waiting to speak with me. He was quite nervous, and I realized how drawn he looked, pale and uncertain. Not the man he was before Cyneric changed. It seemed it wasn't only Cyneric whose former life was lost. Gerald was Cyneric's apprentice and closest friend. They had spent their days together. Now Gerald avoided Cyneric whenever possible, although Cyneric did not feed from him after the one time I made him do it.

"Gerald, I'd like your opinion," I said. "Has Cyneric been pouting?"

Gerald stared at me, eyes wide and uncertain. He licked his lips and flicked a quick glance at Cyneric, then cast his eyes around nervously, not daring to look at either of us. Oh, yes, Cyneric was not the only one whose life was changed by that fateful night.

"Gerald," I prodded, "you know him as well as anyone. Would you put up with this sort of behavior from your friend?"

At the mention of "friend," Gerald's eyes snapped to mine, and he stood up straight. "Well, no sir, I wouldn't."

"What would you do to cure him of indulging in such a pathetic waste of time?"

Cyneric folded his arms across his chest and glared at me.

Gerald dared to grin. "Well, I'd kick his arse, sir."

I dismounted and handed Gerald the reins. "That sounds like a good idea. Cyneric, turn around and bend over. I want a good wide spot to aim at."

Cyneric said, "Sylvio, you're an ass."

Perhaps there was hope for him after all. He'd never called me a name before. I grinned. "I thought we'd decided that's what *you* are." I turned to Gerald. "Take care of things here, will you? Seamas and Mistress Harfor can assist you."

I didn't wait for his reply. I strode over to Cyneric and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He stiffened and began to protest, but when we reappeared standing next to the Coliseum, he stood in the street and goggled with his mouth hanging open.

A carriage driving past nearly ran us down, causing us to dash to the side of the road. Cyneric tilted his head back, trying to find the top of the wall. He turned and walked down the road until

he was far enough away to take it in. Then he stared, mouth agape.

I followed him, and we gazed at it for some time. Finally, I said, “The world is full of wonders. It’s time you saw some of them.”

He looked me and smiled. For the first time since before he became a fledgling, there was a spark of life in his eyes.



As time wore on, I would teleport back to Niveus to check on things. At first, I returned almost daily. Then, as the years went by, I visited less frequently, often returning after a span of weeks or even months. I didn’t bring Cyneric with me.

Seamas fell in love with Ragna, who grew into a beautiful woman and a powerful witch. The clergy in the area kept their promise not to interfere with my estate, but they refused to perform a wedding ceremony for them. So Seamas and Ragna lived “in sin,” and she bore him four children.

I was gone too often to keep my people enthralled anymore. I weaned them off the need for my blood until they were all free to go on with their lives. Most stayed. Life was good at Niveus under Gerald’s stewardship, and time slid by.

Cyneric did not have the gift to teleport, so I would tell him about places I’d seen before, and he would pick one to visit. Some I could not take us to. They had changed too much, which made me curious, so we’d get as close as I was able to jump, then go see what had become of the place. Perhaps the biggest change was the city where Liling’s palace once stood. When we arrived, the people had recently endured a siege, and rule of the area fell to Genghis Khan, whose name we had heard even as far away as our home in the British Isles. After conquering it, he changed the name of the city to Yanjing.

The city was prosperous when Pascal and I visited before. Since then, the area suffered constant rebellion or conquest. When armies clash, it isn’t only those injured in battle who are brought to the brink of death. Starvation and overcrowding led to disease. There were countless humans to feast on—humans who welcomed death.

It is odd to me that later history books seemed to be written with the notion that countries were isolated. At later dates, some were—but during the time of which I speak, merchants traveled to China from all parts of the known world, and Europeans were as likely to be seen in China near the Silk Road as Indians or Arabians. Perhaps it was the general lack of education that later plagued Europe, or the lack of an easy means to communicate, that led to those ideas. In any case, we were not the only tall white men who wandered those cities.

While we were there, I saw the first paper money. I remember thinking it was a foolish notion. Why would a merchant honor a mere slip of paper? Cyneric became intrigued by the idea behind a central repository, a place where the common man, not only the nobility, could store wealth. I could see why that kind of security appealed to him. It was a simple matter for me to hide my wealth, literally. Such a thing was not possible for most.

I also saw the first hand cannon. That was something I could immediately understand. I’d been a soldier as a mortal man. The idea of being able to disable or kill an enemy at a distance with shrapnel instead of a tiny arrow was intriguing to me. One hand cannon could hurl many more projectiles than an arrow, though not with nearly the distance or accuracy of an archer. Still, the idea was fascinating. I found several of them to experiment with.

One night, we were wandering along the Qin Wall, which had nearly all been destroyed. Most of the Great Wall was yet to be built. The section we stood on was still quite impressive, and Cyneric commented that he couldn’t envision man building something larger than the Coliseum. Adonas often felt I was but a child, no matter how long I had lived in years. I was finding that in having a fledgling of my own, I understood him more than before.

It was cold on that wall. Cold can't hurt us, but it is annoying. Besides, if we aren't wearing proper clothing, people tend to take too much notice of us. When Cyneric made the comment about the Coliseum, I turned and took his coat and hat off, and his gloves, and tossed them off the crumbling wall. He watched me take mine off too. There was a strong breeze that night. It caught my scarf and tossed it here and there. We watched it finally settle in the branches of a tree far down the valley. Finally, Cyneric said, "Sylvio, what are you about?"

Grinning like a loon, I put my arm over his shoulder and took him to the base of the pyramid of Khufu. I laughed out loud at his expression. After several minutes of staring in mute shock, and not even feeling annoyed at my laughter, Cyneric said, "Surely man didn't build this."

"Follow me." I led him away from the largest pyramid until we stepped to the side far enough to take in the other two. "As you can see now, it's not the only one. There used to be more than these, and there is an odd-shaped one farther down the valley. Things like this are not made in nature. Pascal said there are pyramids of nearly equal size in the lands across the sea."

Cyneric hadn't been interested in reading very much. That night changed him. I'd mentioned the pyramids to him many years earlier when he was mortal, but he'd been more intrigued with finances and managing the estate's records. He felt he didn't have time to read about lost civilizations. After that night, he consumed any book I brought him. I had amassed a large library by then. It contained scrolls and books in multiple languages. One gift all vampires are given is the gift of tongues; we can read or understand any language, although it does take practice to speak them. As with all things, some are more gifted than others, but we all share that ability to some extent.

Cyneric became fascinated with religions and read all those texts as well. He was surprised to discover how new Christianity was in comparison to older civilizations and cultures. It also shocked him how similar the metaphors and messages were through all the written records.

We traveled down the Nile and investigated the countless ancient sites as we went, finally stopping for a time at Thebae, which is now called Luxor. The people in the cities throughout Arabia were more enlightened and educated than those in the Christian countries once the Romans no longer ruled, not to mention much more clean. Bathing regularly was encouraged in territories controlled by the Muslims.

While at Thebae, we spent many nights digging around the ruins, looking for treasure like other thieves had done for millennia. We didn't find gold and jewels, but we did find tombs. They seemed to be everywhere in that valley. As always, the pictures on the walls fascinated me. It was amazing and humbling that a culture that lasted thousands of years could die so completely that no being, living or dead, had the knowledge to explain the meaning of those pictures.

Early one evening, we dug our way into a massive tomb with many rooms leading off the side of the main passageway. When we had wandered to the end, we came to a figure whose face was now familiar since it seemed to be on every third statue. At that moment, a presence made itself known.

An evil pall surrounded us. Always before, when I had encountered demons in the human world, I had only felt their presence. But this time, I could see it. It came from one of the side tombs and crept toward us on short legs. Its head was elongated, with jaws and skin like that of an alligator, but beyond its head, it had fur like a lion instead of scales.

Its eyes glowed crimson, lit with demon fire as ours are when we are in the throes of feeding. Its tail was thin like a whip. Its black tip was in the shape of a xiphos blade, and it lashed the air each time it took a step.

The thing stopped and regarded us. I had seen pictures of this being on the walls of the tombs, but they did not show it having a long tail as this one did. Its black tongue flicked out and was as a snake's, with a fork in the end.

A wind circled us and a voice whispered, but its mouth did not move. As the wind filled the chamber, we were compelled to transform, and soon both of us stood before the thing in our vampire form. This was a new kind of power.

Up to that point, I had made it my practice to avoid demons. Only their host can be killed; the demon itself is a thing not tied to this world. At most, they can only be temporarily banished to the realm they come from.

I reached out and grasped Cyneric's arm and attempted to teleport us away. Nothing happened. I tried again, and the magic reverberated, sending us both a step backward.

With an immobile face constructed of bone and scales, it should not have been able to—but the demon smiled.

Cyneric was no coward. He drew the sword he'd forged for himself when he was still mortal. It was in the Viking style and hung in a leather scabbard at his hip. He had christened it Ustus. As the blade slid free, he stepped to the side to give each of us room to maneuver.

I drew Muerte from the scabbard that lay between my shoulders and moved a pace to the other side, widening the gap between us. I feared that against this being, Muerte would be just a sword. Without a human body to reside in, a demon has no soul. Which is why they yearn to link with a mortal.

In a voice that was at once all around us and yet intimate, as though it had whispered only in my ear, it said, "Your hearts do not beat. They have been weighed already. Your souls are not mine to take." Its mouth did not move when it spoke.

The words sounded promising, but the demon was now between us and the hole we had dug. I was not certain what kind of foe it would be if it chose to fight us. We were in its territory, and it had already shown it had considerable power by stripping us of our human disguise.

Making no sound and moving on cat feet, but with claws that did not retract, it crept slowly out of the side chamber and into the circle of light from the torch Cyneric held in his other hand. The light of the flame guttered and flickered with the wind that circled us each time the demon spoke. Its eyes gleamed, catching the torchlight, as it gazed at Muerte.

I said, "Only curiosity brought us here. We want nothing from you."

The disembodied voice whispered to us again. "Flesh, whether living or dead, is mine to consume."

That did not sound promising. Without warning, it rushed at Cyneric, giving lie to its slow crawl before. In an instant, it was upon him.

Cyneric slashed at its jaw and jumped aside. Its teeth snapped shut, barely missing their mark. The sound made the space echo. I leaped over it, intending to lead the fight closer to the hole we'd dug. Its tail slashed the air and met me at the top of my arc. The blade on the end of its tail sliced through clothes, skin, and flesh with ease. It cut clear to my ribs and even scored the bones.

I crashed against the stone wall on the other side of the passage and clutched my side, more from shock than pain. Blood poured from the wound "Ah, your bodies are not entirely dead after all," the demon said. "You'll make a fine meal." It flipped its long tail and licked the blood off the blade. Again, it swept toward Cyneric.

Cyneric jumped to the side as it lunged for him and sliced down across its neck, where scales turned to fur, but his sword only sparked on the demon's hide. It launched itself into the air and twisted as it leapt, once again moving with a speed to match our own, and snagged Cyneric's leg with one clawed paw.

Cyneric crashed to the ground, making sand and gravel rain down on us. The demon's jaws opened wide and clamped down on his leg. He screamed in agony. Smoke rather than blood came from the mouth of the demon as its teeth sank through bone and flesh. He shook Cyneric from side to side, and I heard the bone crack.

I ran up the wall and launched myself at the demon's head from above and in front of it in order to avoid its lethal tail. I stabbed Muerte into its eye with enough force that the blade sank into the stone floor.

I haven't heard a roar such as the demon made before or since. It slung its head and tossed both of us up the long passageway.

We slid on our backs for several feet. Cyneric's torch was lost. The only light came from Muerte,

whose blade glowed red, and from the tiny patch of pale starlight that lit the stone floor only a pace away. Down the passage, one red eye could be seen coming out of a darkness that was otherwise complete. I could hear its tail whip the air. The blade on the end sang.

The thought came to me of another stone chamber, and rock falling. I reached for Cyneric and hugged him to my side as I stood directly under that patch of light. I roared my own roar like I had those many years ago, and rock began to fall. As the stones of the ceiling rained down, I jumped with all my strength, and we burst through the hole we'd made earlier and up into the air. Then we fell . . . and kept falling as the sand gave way. The chamber beneath collapsed.

It's not often that I'm frantic—time has taken care of that—but at that moment, I was desperate to get away from that forsaken desert. I've no idea why, but the picture that came to mind then was of the altar in the Druid's glade. It was there that I took us. We landed on the soft grass with a canopy of trees surrounding us.

When I recognized where I'd taken us, I began to laugh. I was amazed that the glade was still there. Cyneric rolled away from me and looked concerned, as if he thought I'd gone mad.

Muerte still glowed red, so I took the blade and pressed it against the slice on my side. The pain was exquisite and turned my giddy laughter into a hiss. When the wound was cauterized and the blood stopped flowing, I stood and assessed Cyneric's mangled leg.

I handed him my cloak and said, "Tear some strips off that. I'll go get some sticks so we can bind it straight."

We must have been more distracted by our narrow escape than I realized, because when I turned around, five vampires were standing at the edge of the clearing on the other side of the altar.