

Apocalypse Night Stories

*Ash & Mary-Lynnette:
Those Who Favor Fire*
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This is, at last, the continuation of the story of Ash Redfern and Mary-Lynnette Carter. For those who haven't read the original, or don't remember, although they are soulmates, the stargazer Mary-Lynnette sent the vampire Ash packing when she heard about the sins of his past. Ever since, a reformed Ash has been trying to make amends. But will it ever be enough for Mary-Lynnette? And what's on the disk that Mary-Lynnette's friend claims will save humankind?

Rating: PG for mild violence. For romantics.

Some say the world will end in fire; Some say in ice. From what I've tasted of desire I hold with *those who favor fire*. But if it had to perish twice, I think I know enough of hate To know that for destruction ice Is also great And would suffice.

-Robert Frost

Ash

Ash Redfern, descendant of the great vampire Hunter Redfern, and currently enjoying the hospitality of the Circle Daybreak city of Harmony's war room on the day the world ended, was finding himself in an awkward position.

It wasn't the impending end of the world that worried him—exactly. Ash had lived a very interesting life and a full one, especially in terms of what he'd done to other people. Of course, he was reformed now. Lady Hannah had given him a white rose pendant at the last festival, which was extremely handy if he wanted to catch another Daybreaker off guard. But he was finding that he wanted to less and less. He was genuinely on the side of the Daybreakers, but more he was on the side of one particular human girl.



Mary-Lynnette. His Kate the Shrew who had somehow shrewdly tamed him, and without ever even breaking into a sweat over it. She'd simply picked him up, rummaged around in his exposed soul, and calmly said, "No, thank you," upon perceiving some of the things she'd found there. Then she'd kicked him in the shins a few times to make sure he didn't forget the incident.

But by then he had already been head over heels for her. The heavy hand of the Soulmate Principle had left him no choice, and he knew, despite her behavior, that his angel must be at least somewhat affected. Meanwhile, she had captured him, Ash the fox, who with a tip of the hat and a "Don't call me—I'll call you," had escaped so many other maiden's tears and tantrums. Mary-Lynn hadn't cried at all. In fact, M'Lyn—his M'Lyn—hadn't seemed affected by his company one way or the other. It had taken bad old-fashioned work to even get her interested in speaking to him. It had even taken some old-fashioned cheating, which on the whole he'd been relieved about. Like luring her with the fact that vampires could see about ten times more stars than humans could. He had been proud of that once; it was unfair and sneaky and it had almost convinced his star-gazing Mary-Lynnette to become a vampire. Besides, it had sounded quite romantic without actually meaning anything in particular—and back then Ash had liked things that sounded romantic but didn't pin you down to anything. Even when he'd realized how he felt about Mary-Lynnette, he'd tried to

get out of it. Ash was, in the old parlance, a rover.

He'd also been an early bloomer and by the time he was twelve he had killed his man (well, vampire really: a husky fellow twice his height). As far as making his man, or woman, well he wasn't one to kiss and tell, but from then on, according to lamia tradition, he was an adult, and free to do what he wanted. He did, making the most out of what he had learned. He hadn't enjoyed killing, even if it had been in self-defense, and he developed a smooth tongue and a ready wit as well as a long, lean, tough catlike body that allowed him to avoid doing any more of it. He also found that a smooth tongue, a ready wit, and a long, lean, catlike body were helpful in another area—in dealing with the opposite sex. He'd spent as much of his time as possible in loving his neighbor, and if that had occasionally included the choice between an undignified exit out the window and the blacking of the eye of his neighbor's steady boyfriend; well, he'd done as the spirit moved him.

But that was then and this was now. He had met Mary-Lynnette, that infernal nuisance of an angel, who had just reached into his chest and pulled his beating heart out, and squeezed. He didn't know how she'd done it. He'd been too busy trying to dodge kicks to his shins. He'd heard of the Soulmate Principle but he'd never imagined that such a tragedy could happen to him. He knew other words for what had happened. It was being caught. It was being tamed. It was even—unbelievably for a rover—being caught and tamed and liking it.

But once it had happened, what was he supposed to do? Hang himself? Didn't work for vampires. Jump in front of a train? Ditto. No, what you had to do was just go down to the nearest jewelry shop and merrily buy a ring—and make damn sure it was a nice one.

After all, who wanted to wear an unfashionable nose-ring?

And then his darling Mary-Lynnette had found him seriously underweight in good deeds, compassion, and repentance, and she had thrown him out of the boat. He was expected to make good on all three deficiencies before she would even think of hauling him back out of the water. She seriously expected him to atone for each wickedness he'd performed, in a way that would wipe out the original wrong.

Quinn had gotten off easier than he had, and Quinn was over four hundred years older than him.

Even at that price, with his word of honor behind it, his angel refused to promise anything. We'll see, she had said. Had there ever been such a belle dame sans merci?

Meanwhile, he was not even allowed to see her, not even when she had been living in the San Francisco Time Bubble. It left him thinking all the more about her, her quick eagerness at anything unknown, her bravery in the face of danger, her kindness to small things. Or the sharpness of her wit, ever looking for something to whet itself against. Or her eyes, clear larkspur blue and snapping with interest or anger or excitement. Or her triangular kitten-shaped face that somehow took the edge off all her insults. Or her long limbs, tanned from all the work she did outside . . .

It was better not to think about things like that, although it was difficult to help it. The warmth of her, the smell of her . . . But he couldn't afford to get distracted. Because Mary-Lynnette, after spending years in the San Francisco Bubble, had finally decided that the Apocalypse wasn't coming immediately and had gone off to college. In fact, he had just been thinking about requesting an Audience with her Highness to see if she might approve just slightly more of him now. She might even—if he had bared his inmost soul to her—have agreed to a new deal. He had remade himself, all for the sake of his lady, and he was eager—no, make that desperate—to see what she thought of the results.

All that had been true up until five minutes ago, when that TV anchor had announced that many towns, including Cambridge in Massachusetts, had been "bombed" and were now a wasteland of raging fire and destruction.

And then there had been just one thought in his mind. Find her. Find Mary-Lynnette and face the end together. Whatever else was happening he had the illogical feeling that she needed him, and the thought was enough to drive him insane.

Insane enough that when Thierry Descoudres, the Lord of the Night World, who was also the owner of this Bubble and everything in it, had turned away from his consultations for a moment, Ash had walked right up to him.

And fallen on his knees.

He, Ash, who had never begged for anything in his life, had begged. He'd pleaded with Thierry for a helicopter, the only way to reach Cambridge in time, he believed.

But that was impossible. All the Night World military helicopters had already been sent out, some to pick up vital personnel, some to try to track down the dragons who were doing this "bombing" of major cities.

But Ash knew that there was something else: Thierry's private helicopter.

And so he had stayed on his knees.

"Thierry—Lord Thierry—I know you have a personal helicopter. Please. I'll only keep it for a few hours, maybe less. Lord Thierry"—he was aware that everyone in the room was looking at Ash Redfern: Ash, the imperturbable, Ash, the Rude, the Snide and the Sarcastic, Ash Redfern, the lineal descendant of Hunter himself, groveling on his knees—"it's my soulmate. She goes to Harvard. I know she's not dead." He gave the silver cord a tug, just to comfort himself with this at least: the other end wasn't flapping loose. "I know she's not dead. But she needs me. She may be hurt, trapped . . . in danger of her life. Please, Thierry. I'll never ask anything of you again," he added, wildly, because Thierry wasn't saying anything, but was looking at him with those great dark, bottomless eyes, eyes that were the way they had been before he had found Hannah.

And when Ash couldn't put the illusion of safety behind him any longer by babbling, Thierry had a chance to speak.

First, though, he just looked at Ash with those sorrowful, infinitely compassionate eyes. The bubble of hope that had been rising in Ash wobbled. Finally Thierry said, "Ash, I can't do it. Not because I don't want to, but because that helicopter isn't mine to give or loan any longer. I gave it to our newest member to use, to evacuate her family. It belongs to Sarah Strange."

Ash felt the shock go through him as he remembered; the stomach-hollowing fear. Not so very long ago he had called this girl's soulmate a whole packet of venomous names, and for some reason that he couldn't retrieve immediately he'd said something about her as well. "Sniveling little girlfriend." Not wise. Not wise at all. M'Lyn would be disgusted with him. If M'Lyn was all right. If M'Lyn was safe enough to be able to think at all. Slowly, excruciatingly aware of the eyes on him, he got to his feet. Even more slowly, he turned toward Sarah. He made himself throw a glance at her face.

Not good. She was looking serious. He had already tried the throwing-himself-to-his-knees trick. And maybe she could be taken in by that if he tried it again, but suddenly Ash was sick of himself, and his tricks, and his smooth silver tongue.

One foot in front of the other, he made his way to Sarah. He was still looking down. She was short compared to his height, so that his looking down meant looking her right in the face.

He stopped and took a deep breath and then he looked her directly in the eyes.

"I'll go on my knees if you want. I just thought maybe it might look cheap, after . . . Can I tell you why I want the helicopter?"

She nodded, gravely, obviously trying to fight off her own terror at the situation they were in. She was such an ordinary slip of a girl, he tried to tell himself, but she'd been with Lady Hannah before dinner and Winfrith had dolled her up until she was almost frighteningly beautiful. She was wearing that sweeping corn-colored gown, with her light brown hair up, and what looked like several million dollars of canary diamonds. And in spite of all that, it was her face that caught you. Huge eyes the color of deep jungle pools—aquamarine in its purest, truest blue. A sweet wide mouth that was trying to be stern but was quivering too much to do its job right. No makeup that he could see. But no makeup or jewelry or other adornments could be more attractive than the involuntary quiver of that mouth.

Who was this girl?

Ash was an expert in perhaps half-a-dozen things. One of them was women. If he tried, he could find the proper key to unlock this nature child who didn't need makeup—but he didn't try. It wasn't the two two-legged guard dogs on either side of her, Kierlan Drache and Mal Harman, each glaring at him as if they wished he would drop dead with no further ado, either.

It was the pulse in the tender column of her throat. Vampires always watched an opponent's throat. And this girl wasn't amused, as you could tell by the mouth quiver; and she wasn't just frightened . . . she was terrified. Her heart was pounding so hard that it almost shook the slim body in the sweeping gown. And if it gave her any comfort to have the helicopter—well, Thierry had given it to her for a reason. Ash would find some other way to get to Mary-Lynnette. He'd walk before he'd take this girl's last comfort.

He turned away abruptly. "Sorry to bother you," he said, and turned away.

Now he was thinking: what else? A car? —and felt a gentle hand on his arm. And then he heard the most beautiful words he ever had before.

"Don't go."

He half turned, afraid to hope, and she went on. She had a beautiful voice, he thought wildly, very young, but very gentle. "The helicopter's not really mine. And I don't really have anyone to save out there—"

"Alan and the Alan-ettes?" one of the two guard dogs suggested.

"Her step-father and step-brothers and sisters," the other one translated.

"This area hasn't been attacked. I'll find some other way—"

Ash groaned internally. No. "No."

Sarah looked muleheaded. "Yes."

"No. I mean it."

"Yes. I mean it."

He'd found himself a girl as stubborn as Mary-Lynnette. He hadn't thought they made that kind anymore.

"Before this sinks to the level of rather ludicrous nobility"—Quinn's dry voice cut through the murmuring that had taken over the room—"we can settle it in an instant. Flip a coin."

"A coin?" somebody said, "Over a matter of life and death like this?"

"No," Sarah said, suddenly gaining authority from somewhere, drawing it out of the air to wear it like a cloak. "We'll work it out; one uses the helicopter first, then the other one." Then she did something so unexpected that Ash almost jumped. She turned to him and said, "Tell me about Mary-Lynnette."

Ash opened his mouth and shut it. He did know women. He'd bet he already had the key that would turn this one. But would that be fair? He thought a little more and decided it was when Mary-Lynnette's life was on the line. It couldn't be wrong just to show this girl, Sarah, how much she was like his M'Lyn.

"She loves walking in the night forest," Ash said slowly. "She knows all the different plants. It was out there, at night, that she finally accepted she was my soulmate," he added, the words coming more quickly now. "But even when she admitted that we were soulmates she wouldn't let me make her a vampire—and it takes a strong character to refuse me when I'm wheedling."

Sarah shuddered slightly. Ash could read it as if she'd said the words aloud, "I'm no strong character, but I would never be a vampire."

Terrific. She was prejudiced against blood-drinkers, on top of everything. Ash winced before he could stop himself; Sarah drew a step back.

"It's the way I was raised," Ash said softly. "I don't think you can really imagine it, but try to think of the Amish. I was raised in isolation like that. The only customs I knew were the ones my family had created. We didn't have slaves. We had . . . human servants. They weren't badly treated."

Sarah was looking at him with absolute horror.

Something inside Ash folded. "You're right. It was terrible. 'Abomination.' That's what she said."

"He and his sisters and Rashel and I went a while ago and cleared it out," Quinn said, in the same tones he'd use if he were saying they had all gone to a concert together. If you could imagine Quinn going to a concert.

Sarah looked even more horrified at this.

Ash suddenly wished desperately for Rowan, the oldest of his sisters. She would look at them all with her steady, clear-sighted brown eyes and they would understand. "We didn't

hurt anybody unnecessarily," he said heavily. "We did use wood and fire when they were needed. Mostly they weren't; without Hunter; the vampire's spirits were broken. We—" He broke off. The naive girl in front of him was a vampire virgin. She had only just been introduced to the Night World and the kind of people who lived there. She found all vampires repulsive.

She's due for a shock soon, he thought, glancing at her guard dogs.

"May I try again?" he asked and was desperately grateful when she swallowed and said huskily, "Yes."

"Mary-Lynnette wouldn't approve of me trying to make her a special case. But she really does deserve it. She's one of the people who'll help put the world back together after—all this." He gestured to the banks of computer screens showing the ruins of the earth's cities. "She's kind and she's brilliant and she loves the stars. She'll put the earth back together just to get to the stars. And,"—he realized that his voice was shaking—"I can feel that she needs me." He clutched unthinkingly at the silver cord. "As long as she's alive I can track her and help her, but if I wait too long, or if she gets too weak . . ." He bowed his head. He couldn't finish, and he couldn't look her in the face. His longing for Mary-Lynnette was like a physical pain, so that if anyone had asked "do you miss her?" it would be like asking, "do you miss your leg?"

"Do you realize, you told me all about her, but you never once mentioned what she looked liked?" asked Sarah. Was there a hint of approval in her voice?

"She's—well, what does it matter? She's dark with fair skin. And she's tall. She's not beautiful, I suppose, but she's striking. If you ever saw her you wouldn't forget her. And she's my soulmate." He turned away.

"You can have the helicopter."

"And I don't even know how long I can go on, needing to go to her without going crazy."

"Ash," said Quinn. "She said you could have it."

Once, he would have swung her off her feet and spun her around the room, regardless of the disasters outside. Or else taken the opportunity for a celebratory kiss on the mouth. Now, he fell involuntarily to his knees and kissed her hand, clasped it to his cheek a moment and then jumped up.

He couldn't help but turn back, though, for a moment, curious as a cat. "Thank you. I do thank you. But why did you do it?"

"I found out why you loved her."

"And how does that make a difference?"

"You didn't start by telling me how beautiful she was. If you'd said that I'd have known you weren't really soulmates."

Love Mary-Lynnette just for her outside? He'd fallen in love with her at first sight—but that was through the rosy glow of the soulmate principle. There was so much more of Mary-Lynnette inside to love that her inside had showed on her outside—or something. Anyway Ash had seen too many beautiful outsides with nothing of worth inside them to get caught that way. Even an eternally beautiful woman with no mind to sharpen his against would be a deadly bore shortly. Whereas Mary-Lynnette's mind was so beautiful that he would never get tired of looking at and the outer packaging was almost irrelevant.

"I love her because I love her," he concluded. "I'll get to her if I have to walk all the way, but—she needs me now. I—can take the helicopter now?"

"Right now. And—Ash?"

"Yes?"—sharply. He was suspicious to the last.

"Take care of yourself. And call me whenever you can and tell me if she—if Mary-Lynnette's—okay."

"Of course," Ash said automatically. He stared at this willow wand of a girl who seemed to really care about other peoples' problems. It didn't occur, even to his cynical mind, that she'd said it because once Mary-Lynnette was safe, the bird would be free for Sarah's own use. And if it had, he'd have known that it wasn't true. She cared.

He just wished he could bring himself to like her companions, especially Kierlan. As a rogue himself, he knew when a guy was an even bigger one. And he'd swear that this guy

was off the charts.

Mary-Lynnette

When Mary-Lynnette came to she was sprawled beside her bed. Her first thought was: *earthquake*. But the room was still jolting—roughly enough to send college textbooks cascading out of the shelves, papers and pens flying off the desk, and clothes spilling out of the closet, all without stopping as if the building were taking hit after hit from bombs. At the same time there was a noise like the roar of a giant flamethrower.

Thank God my best telescope is back in Briar Creek, she thought a touch wildly. And then she thought, but what's happening in Briar Creek? As the room settled down, she took out her earplugs. Mary-Lynnette was at heart country girl, used to the shriek of the bluejay and the creak of the ponderosa pine. Here, she just wasn't used to the sounds of a bustling campus and the streets around it. Her earplugs were good earplugs, attenuating up to 40 decibels, at frequencies from 125 to 8000 hertz, and when she was wearing them it was almost impossible to hear anything from the outside world. But now, taking them out made no difference. The world was as silent as if she still had them in. She got up and slipped her feet into sneakers and went to the window to see the world.

She looked out on hell.

The sky was a strange dark orange streaked with pale green. She guessed the effect came somehow from flames that were reflecting off low-lying clouds. She could see the actual fires here and there through gray smoke. What she couldn't see—or hear—was traffic, not the wild honking of horns in the distance, not the bass roar of a truck nor the squeal of brakes, nor the hooting of ambulances.

The silence was downright eerie. There was no shouting, no thud of running footsteps, no alarms. It was as if everyone in the world had disappeared except her. The campus was an island to itself; set back from outside streets, but from what she could see through the window, there were abandoned cars stopped everywhere—even on the grass—with their driver's doors open. As if people had just stopped, got out, and walked away.

How long was I unconscious? Mary-Lynnette was a human, but in some ways she had a vampire's enhanced senses. She ought to have been able to hear *something* from the streets.

She stood there for one moment, caught by the sight, by the soundlessness, and then she began to move.

Stepping back from the window, she unzipped her sweatshirt and dropped it behind her. She then stepped out of her sweatpants bottoms, underpants, and socks, heeling the socks off and flinging the clothes away without looking to see where they fell. She was at the same time leaning to reach for a very special gray duffel bag in the back of her closet. Finding it, she pulled it forward. In another second she was dressing in a heavy dark shirt, Levis, thick socks and sturdy boots, suitable for cross-country walking. She topped the outfit with another sweater, added a windbreaker with detachable hood, and then finally gave a few licks and a promise with a brush to her wavy dark hair—so much shorter than it had been years ago.

Reversible hat in pocket: check. A pair of sturdy hiking boots and extra socks: check. Basic toiletries: in duffel bag: check. Laminated maps of the area: check. Waterproof pad and pen in notebook: check. Several MRE (Meals Ready To Eat) for basic field rations, extra bags of jerky, peanuts and a few power bars: check. Water in eco-friendly disposable pouches: check. Two flashlights, with extra batteries for each: check. Compressed block of toilet paper, space blankets the size of candy bars, sleeping bag the size of a thick book: check. Stun gun, mace, brass knuckles, cosh, and a few other little pieces of equipment that classed the user as a realist: check.

The bag was not graceful, or cool, or glamorous. The only statement the bag made was that this princess planned to rescue herself.

Mary-Lynnette had known for years about the Apocalypse. It was just that, like everyone else, she had stopped believing it was coming.

Mary-Lynnette didn't hoist the bag to her shoulders right away. She did something she'd been putting off, something so frightening that tears were dripping down her lashes even as she opened a safe in the closet and pulled out a strange looking cell phone, bulkier than the usual and with two thick black antennas.

Then she made a phone call.

Ash

From the launch pad, Ash climbed into the luxurious, black-leather padded helicopter's rear cabin. He almost expected to be offered a glass of champagne by a crisply uniformed flight attendant. Ash had been in many different kinds of helicopters but he had never before seen this kind of flying tank turned into an oak-and-leather conference room that was the epitome of luxury.

Thierry Descoudres, Lord of the Night World, the lawful ruler of every vampire, witch, shapeshifter, and tea-leaf reader in the world, believed in going first class everywhere. The passenger compartment here looked like the interior of a small airplane. Its roomy, leather upholstered seats were designed to slide on rails toward or away from each other. A gigantic refrigerated compartment in back reminded hedonists irresistibly of that phantom champagne, and doctors irresistibly of necessary medications (as did a screened-off area to one side where everything up to and including major surgery could be done); there were magazines, fresh flowers, munchies, flagons of water, all securely contained. There were headsets for those who wanted to talk to the crew, earphones for those who wanted to listen to music, and ear-mufflers for those who just plain didn't like noise. There were night-vision goggles for humans not naturally endowed with night vision, and individual computer screens for passengers, which at the moment were all showing a room full of somber-looking people in formal dress having a polite and vehement argument—the war room, Ash thought. They'd been interrupted during that formal dinner by the Apocalypse. In general, the chopper had anything a reasonable traveler could want.

After Ash was inside, black-visored figures helped aboard two large wolves that were restrained by neither harness nor leash, but that each wore a silver collar with an emblem: one a stylized rose and the other the simple outline of an archetypical flower with five petals.

"Hey, Remy; hiya, Lupe." Ash said. The werewolves turned keen, intelligent eyes on him. The silver rose meant that Remy, the all-black wolf with a blaze of white on his forehead, worked directly for Lord Thierry; the simple five-petaled flower was the symbol for Iliana, the Witch Child, and meant that Lupe, the brindled wolf, was working for the Wild Powers right now.

Inside his own head, Ash raised his eyebrows. Thierry was providing him with everything. His personal helicopter, a highly trained crew; werewolves from S.E.A.R.C.H.; everything. Now it was going to be up to Ash. If he couldn't find Mary-Lynnette with this lot, he didn't deserve her.

The two wolves headed toward the back of the spacious rear cabin to make themselves secure and comfortable in their own way. Yes, Ash had more than everything a reasonable person could want, but what he wanted was something unreasonable. "Can I talk to the pilot?" he asked of the black-clad, black-helmeted figure who had boosted him into the helicopter. His words were ignored, which he took pretty much as meaning, "No, you ungrateful loony."

"The pilot's probably pretty busy right now, sir," a voice said, or rather shouted, from just a few feet away.

Ash *almost* jumped. The only thing you could complain about in this helicopter was that it was noisy. He'd logged the presence of the flight officer in his mind and then forgotten about him. The man was fiddling with a HF headset which seemed to blend into the quiet luxury of the accoutrements around him, his black and silver uniform almost making him disappear.

But his presence was there. Ash should never have lost sight of it.

I am really, really tense, Ash thought. He checked, found the officer to be a vampire like himself, and began a quieter, telepathic conversation.

*Sorry. You probably know; my name is Ash—
I don't know anybody in the Night World who doesn't know Ash Redfern, sir. I'm Petty Officer Nate Campell.*

About the pilot; I just wanted to ask him—

Her, the navigator interrupted.

Her, then, if we could do something like a routine Coast Guard search pattern for Mary-Lynnette, with me conning for the pilot. I don't know the first thing about the Night World military, so I don't know if everybody's familiar with the Coastie's system of search—

Here he was interrupted again, politely but firmly. If you'll look around, sir, you'll see this is a modified Sikorsky H-60 Jayhawk—

"Paint me blue like a baboon's bottom!" Ash hadn't even glanced at the helicopter's profile. Thierry had probably never used it for an actual rescue before, but—

Lord Thierry sent you a crew that's all ex-Coastguard or trained by Coastguard, the other vampire went on, forestalling Ash's next question. And the werewolves are here for onshore search.

Then Ash looked behind him. Through the rear jump door, someone had just dumped packets of flares and chemical lights next to the collapsible wire basket for survivors into the immaculate interior of Thierry's private helicopter. Ash started to address them, then checked the person's features in what light there was to be had. "Thank you, ma'am."

"No problem; I've got to secure all that before we take off. And I'm not a "ma'am," sir; I'm Petty Officer Georgie Douglas, shapeshifter and the rescue swimmer."

"Thierry thinks I'm going to find Mary-Lynnette in the water?" Horrifying images rose in Ash's head.

"Well, sir, I guess Lord Thierry figures that there's a big pond close to the target area: we call it the Atlantic Ocean." The young woman's smile took the edge off her words. "And the last vampire enclaves we know of in that zone were on islands out there in that pond. If they're taking her there—this basket isn't just for water rescue. It's for picking folks off boats, all sorts of things."

"I know about the enclaves." Ash remembered what it had felt like, being part of the crew that had helped burn them to the ground and take the occupants captive—the ones who hadn't fought to the death, anyway.

"That was a proud day for us all, sir," Georgie Douglas said. Ash had been broadcasting his thoughts unintentionally. He really was close to losing control.

"But you think any vampires after her might still head for there," Ash said. "And that they definitely *will* go for her."

The way the rescue swimmer looked down was answer enough.

After the last of the equipment was stowed, Ash asked again to talk to the pilot. After a moment, everyone was connected to the cockpit, one way or another, and Ash had been introduced to Lieutenants Raleigh and Simms in the cockpit. When the two-way mirror separating the cockpit from the passenger cabin was turned off he could see the pilot, a young black woman wearing one of those ebony and silver helmets, and the co-pilot, another young black woman, also helmeted. They were both vampires.

"Okay, so everybody's familiar with the Coastguard search patterns," Ash said, getting straight to the issue. "I just don't know if you people are familiar with S.S.O."

They looked at each other and Ash could practically hear the pilot say, "Huh?"

"*Soulmate* Search Operation. It's experimental, but this is going to be the best chance to prove that it works. One soulmate homes in on the other one's psychic profile. I figure that's the only way to run an operation like this, since we don't know where the target, my soulmate Mary-Lynnette, is. We don't know whether she's gone to ground or on the move. We don't know whether she's been taken captive, maybe out to sea. We don't know much of anything. But she's sending out a signal like an EPIRB—psychically—and I'm the only one that can pick that up. The closer we get, the stronger it is. I figure it should be no problem."

And then he swallowed, because it was a new idea and NIH—not invented here. This Coast Guard crew was used to homing in on the warbling of a radio distress beacon, and then working as a finely-tuned team to get the aircraft to its goal. They weren't used to an unproved program that relied—completely—on a civilian's feelings of romance.

Ash heard a new voice, concise, feminine, used to command, in his mind. It was on a private channel in his head. Must be the pilot. *Has this ever been done in a field situation, sir? she asked slowly.*

No. Just practice runs.

There was another moment and then to his great relief she said for all to hear, I can't think of a better cause with which to christen it. Welcome aboard. So you're doing the conning for me? From the beginning?

Just like a sea rescue, even if we never leave land. That's the one big advantage of it—you can look for anybody without them knowing you're after them.

In other words, fly high. You got it, sir. We'll be all over them before they know we're in the area.

Just one other thing . . . Ash liked to be on a first name basis with those who were responsible for his life. Call me Ash, please.

From the cockpit came, *I'm Cobra, and this is Mantra. Both from Master Thierry's personal entourage.*

Cobra? Ash thought. Mantra? Are we in a comic book now?

I meant your real names, please, he said persuasively. Oh, come on—we may all be dying together soon.

There was a pause of ten measured seconds. Then, finally, I am Courtney Raleigh, sir.

And another voice, mellow and just slightly amused, *I'm the copilot, sir. Tracy Simms. Pleased to make your acquaintance.*

Something inside Ash whimpered softly and said, you're being flown out to fight dragons by a Courtney and a Tracy who both sound about two years out of high school? But he managed to say "hello" politely.

But not without revealing some of his reservations, apparently. When he was done, the pilot said sweetly, *Close, but not quite right sir. It's Kourtney, with a "K," sir; and Tracee, with two ees at the end. And we've both won the Distinguished Flying Cross, sir.*

Ash's mind gave up, then. It was beaten. He apologized.

A few minutes later they were speeding along the runway, and then Kourtney Raleigh pulled power and they were going up, fast, fast into the blackness above.

Mary-Lynnette

"Help!"

There it was again. Mary-Lynnette was jogging roughly parallel to Oxford Street. She had just gone past the massive Science Center and was heading by Jefferson Hall, when she'd first heard the cry. The campus itself was decimated. Harvard Yard, where her dorm was, looked as if it had been bombed. While she jogged she used the odd, bulky cell phone she'd unshipped back at her room. Nothing. Not even a busy signal or recorded message. And that proved that something was wrong—very wrong. The Night World telephone system was so good somebody had suggested it must be subetheric. Not true—but it did make use of some pretty amazing microchips and a dash of sorcery, and it operated on frequencies that weren't supposed to be open to the public.

She was trying to get in touch with her family, with her brother Mark, and Ash's three sisters, all in the San Francisco Bubble. They had several phones like this. So did her father in Oregon. And the fact that she couldn't even raise one sent a feeling like the trickle of an ice cube down her back, and a prickling all over her skin.

Bad news, kiddo, she thought. You'd think at least that Ash might have called.

"Help—"

There it was. Mary-Lynnette moved smoothly into higher gear and ducked into Jefferson Hall. She kept up the run; this building didn't look at all stable. And she tried not to think of Ash as she went. She was tempted—more than a little—to tug on the silver cord that connected them so that at least she would at least know he was alive. But what could kill Ash? she thought sardonically, still straining her ears. He would survive a universal flood. Paddling in a ducky, boat, getting a tan.

"Please, help! Somebody!"

There! It wasn't a classroom; it was coming from off to the right, from one of the teacher's offices. Mary-Lynnette saw a door ajar. She looked inside and at first saw only chaos, then realized what had happened. A smallish girl had been sitting at the largeish desk when a row of heavy steel bookcases that had been stacked all around the desk had fallen. Now, they had formed a cage around her so that she couldn't pull away from the desk again, or even lift her head.

"Please! I'm trapped! Please!"

"It's okay. I'm here," she said. "And I'll get you out; just wait a sec."

"Oh, thank God, thank God!"

"Don't be scared," Mary-Lynnette said, in big-sister mode already. Just give me a minute."

"I'll try. But it was so awful when everyone started going toward that—noise. That call. I wanted to go to, but I couldn't. I was stuck."

"A—call?" Mary-Lynnette was bewildered.

"Yes. If you'd heard it, you'd never forget it—but it's too hard to describe. It was a terrible sound, awful, but when I heard it I had to get to it. But I couldn't."

That may have been your good luck, Mary-Lynnette thought.

"Is that where everybody else has gone?"

"Is everyone gone?"

"Yeah. It looks like we're the only two people on campus."

"Thank God you came to save me," the girl under the shelves said quietly, then added something in a foreign language; Mary-Lynnette guessed it was a prayer or saying. After a moment she said, "My name is Devi Srinivasa." She laughed. "But with my last name, most people just say Devi S. What's yours?"

"Mary-Lynnette Carter. But with my first name most people leave some part of it out even though I ask them not to. I answer to Mary, or Mare, or Lynn, or M'Linn—okay, now I'm going to lift this top shelf off to the left. It might hurt as the blood flow comes back."

"I'll help push. No, please—I want to. Just tell me which way."

As Mary-Lynnette got the steel bookcase off the girl she could see more of her. She was very small, with bones like a bird, and dark hair falling in one long braid down her back.

There was a long, busy time, during which Mary-Lynnette figured out which bookcase needed to come off next, and which way it ought to go. At last they were down to one.

"What were you doing in here?" Mary-Lynnette asked, prying the last of the bookcases off and pushing it across the desk. And almost in the same breath, "Are you okay? Is anything broken?"

"My wrist hurts a little, but I'm sure it's not broken." Then Devi's chin came up in determination. "As for the other, I could ask you the same question. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here because I was hiking out," Mary-Lynnette said. "And then I heard this little thin sound like a call for help from the rubble here. Do you know there's one whole wall missing from the Science Center?"

"No." Devi had managed stand up, and was fumbling around the desk. She found a computer disk. "Got it. And it looks undamaged. He *Ram*. . . Now, if I can just find my folder . . ."

"Forget your folder. This whole building could come down at any minute and kill us both. Let me help you over the bad spots and let's get out of here."

Devi hesitated, then put the disk in her pocket and let Mary-Lynnette help her crawl over the desk—there was no other way, the shelves that had fallen all around were too unstable—then off the other side. They grinned at each other briefly when Devi was free, and Mary-Lynnette slipped her backpack back on.

"Okay, this way. Hey, do you know how to use a taser? Or Mace?"

Devi shook her head. "Sorry."

"Never mind."

"I did have an uncle who was a priest," Devi offered, apparently out of the blue.

"That's nice," muttered Mary-Lynnette, busy finding a place they could get through the walls to the outside of the building. It was dangerous because of cables sticking up from

nowhere and piles of debris that looked solid, but weren't.

"The world will be grateful to you for you helping me rescue this disk," Devi continued. "That was my mother's office. She is a physicist, but mostly she works at the Polar Station. In the Antarctic, you know. She e-mails her findings back here. We have a sort of system—" She went on talking, but Mary-Lynnette couldn't really understand what it was about. Besides, she had something else to listen for.

She found the whole story of the "call" extremely disturbing. She had no idea what could make a noise that would draw you to it—even though it was a terrible noise and you didn't really want to go. It was Night World stuff, no doubt about that. But from the looks of the city around her, the area had been bombed, and that wasn't like any Night World stuff she'd ever heard about.

What could wreak such havoc, but leave people alive to get out of their cars and follow some eerie "call . . . ?"

Nothing natural, that was certain, nothing natural.

Off campus, walking beside cars parked at crazy angles, their footsteps always accompanied by the crunching of glass, she tried to keep her mind on track. They were two young girls, and night was falling. That meant that they were automatically in trouble, in a city where all the rules had broken down at once. And Mary-Lynnette had a feeling, a sixth sense that said she hadn't been left alone on that campus for nothing. That there were people just waiting for her to get out into the open, people after her specifically.

The hairs on the back of her neck lifted suddenly. She held her breath and listened. Yes.

"Devi?" she whispered as they reached Windell Street.

"Yes, Mary-Lynnette?"

"Since you don't fight, can you get ready to run? There are people behind us—don't look—and they're not nice people. They're not following us to ask us if we need help. They're bad people, and I'm going to have to deal with them sooner or later. But first I'm going to get my back to a wall. Then I'll say, 'Now!' and you run away as fast as you can and don't look back. Don't worry about me. Just run. Do you understand?"

"I understand, but if you think that I'm going to leave you alone after you rescued me, you're"—Devi knocked on her own forehead—"suffering from concussion, I suppose."

Mary-Lynnette almost laughed out loud. "All right, but don't try to fight them. These aren't normal people. Run and try to find help if you can."

"In a city where everyone has disappeared except us?"

"Well, you can try—shh! Don't talk." Mary-Lynnette froze. She had just heard something different behind them.

It was glass crunching. Not loudly, furtively. Mary-Lynnette put a finger to her lips. Sure, there ought to be looters and worse stalking the buildings, but her sixth sense told her that these followers were after her. Ahead she saw a little cubby hole of rubble that protected them on two sides. She motioned with the tiniest tilt of her head that she and Devi should get into it. Devi looked frightened, but obeyed, and silently.

And not a moment too soon. They had just stepped in when the crunchings got louder and louder. "Where'd they go?" a clear male voice said.

"They just—disappeared," another one answered.

"Nobody disappears on my watch," a third, menacing-but-laid-back sounding voice said. "They're twenty feet in front of you, to the left. Use your eyes, since it looks like there's nothing worthwhile in between them."

Voice One chuckled sycophantically. Mary-Lynnette was already talking to Devi. "I'll be using Mace and this stun gun, so stay away from me. Swing my backpack at them, if you can. It's pretty heavy; you might knock somebody over. And be ready to run when I say 'run.'"

Devi looked at the backpack doubtfully. "I really think that I—"

"We don't have time to talk. Here they come—"

"But I still feel that perhaps I would be of more use—"

And then the first thug came around the corner.

Mary-Lynnette felt the small hairs trembling at the back of her neck. He looked

human, but something told her he wasn't. The jubilant howl he set up when he found them might have helped her reach this conclusion. She raised the can of Mace and gave him a faceful, holding her own breath.

"You—bitch!" He shook his head angrily but seemed in no way incapacitated by the Mace. Just then Guy Number Two arrived. Guy One was still cursing, but was now blocking their way onward, so they were stuck in their cubby hole.

"We got her. She looks just like the picture," Guy Two, the new arrival, said.

"Stay behind me," Mary-Lynnette gasped, thinking that it might have been safer for Devi to go her own way. Obviously, they were after her, Mary-Lynnette, and not any of Mary-Lynnette's chance-met companions.

"Okay—run," Mary-Lynnette said, making a dive for the first guy, who was still doing nothing but congratulating himself. Maybe she could hold them both off while Devi got away.

But instead of running, Devi dropped the backpack, did a beautiful pirouette, and kicked Guy Two in the head. Then she rounded on the first guy, who was trying to slug Mary-Lynnette, mulekicked him in the chest to get his attention, and then unleashed a whiplash of a kick somewhat lower, causing him to bellow in pain like an ox.

"Now, let's run," Devi said, not even out of breath. They ran.

Mary-Lynnette gasped, "I thought you were just some pacifist. You wouldn't even take Mace!"

"My uncle was a genuine *fighting priest*. They're growing more and more scarce these days."

"I can see why, if they fight each other they way you fought him!"

They came out to the streets. Everything in the night seemed supernaturally clear, and Mary-Lynnette felt she could hear the drop of a bobby pin. They look a moment to look up and down the smoldering street and then started toward a flattened playground.

"I'd give anything for a drink. I was stuck under those bookcases so long, yelling."

Still trotting toward the playground, Mary-Lynnette pulled out a super-sipper full of water and gave it to her. "Just keep moving."

"Oh, God, you're like a miracle. My family would be glad to adopt you."

They got to the playground. There was plenty of space there, so an enemy couldn't jump out at you from concealment. But there was also nothing but space, nowhere to conceal *themselves*.

It looked as if that wasn't going to matter for very long. They could hear little rustling movements on either side of them, and now, movements ahead. They were being *herded* into that playground.

"Did your uncle tell you what to do when attacked by about twenty guys at once?"

Mary-Lynnette asked.

"I think he would have answered with a suggestion to prepare my soul for the coming of my next life. I hope it will be more peaceful."

"Terrific," Mary-Lynnette said.

It wasn't just noises now. They could see glimpses of faces and hands in the large circle that was slowly tightening on them, closing in. There were far, far more than even Devi could manage. Over twenty. More than that.

And, in the hands, the glitter of steel.

And the remarks, of course. Mary-Lynnette just filtered them out: the invitations to go to a knife-wielder's house to party; the personal remarks, the smooching noises. If you were female you had to learn to not hear this kind of stuff, just let it fade into a sort of hum in the background. She hoped Devi's uncle had taught Devi the same kind of trick.

Funny, though, that when they were really up against it, two unexpected things happened. One was that some of the taunting got through. "You an' me, we're gonna *partee* later," a tall thick voice said, and she had a glimpse of a hand waving what looked like a machete. "After our—uh, employers—are done with you, we get to have a good time!"

You sap, Mary-Lynnette, thought, your employers are never going to be done with us, and you'll be incredibly lucky if they let you out of this alive.

The second unexpected thing was that another one of those earthquake-like events happened, while brilliant red light blossomed. The sound wave hit them almost

instantaneously. Missile fire? It was like nothing that Mary-Lynnette had heard or seen before. But it was like something she had been dreading.

If only she'd been able to get the emergency signal on. But whoever was conducting this war was smart; blocking the stolen frequencies that the Night World used for emergency contact was a clever, if horrific, idea.

"Hey, girlie!" Somehow this deep voice did keep cutting through her filters. "I'm Mannie here, and I've decided I like you. You come with Mannie right now, no fuss, and we won't turn you over. The rest of them will pretend they never saw you."

Just for the heck of it, Mary-Lynnette said, "And this little girl goes free, right?"

There was a silence, then everybody laughing at once. It wasn't nice laughter.

"She's our consolation prize," one sneering voice said.

"Well, Mannie, or Manless, or whoever you are, you can go to hell. Which should feel just like home to you," Mary-Lynnette said.

Devi had been looking at Mary-Lynnette. Now, she smiled a little, grimly.

The circle was close enough now that Mary-Lynnette could see whole bodies, not just hands with silvery knives. And oh, wouldn't the circlers be enjoying themselves now. Knowing that there was no way for their victims to get away except straight up.

"Hey, can you fly, girlie?"

Yes, they knew exactly the kind of fear that their victims must be feeling, and they wanted to stretch the moments out—though not too much, since their "employers" were undoubtedly waiting.

Mary-Lynnette wondered if Devi could hold it together when she saw that some of the attackers were not human. When bodies began to lengthen and fangs to grow, when faces became grotesque and two feet dropped down to four. But it was too late to begin a lecture about the Night World now.

Strange, that at a time like this your mind wandered, she thought. Her own mind was wandering to the most absurd things: like a lazy, drawling, catlike young man who could never be joined with her—and who could never really be apart from her, either.

Oh, it was enough to drive a girl to clichés. She'd say his name then. Ash. Ash Redfern. Ash of the many-colored eyes. Ash whose dark existence depended on persuading young girls to share their blood with him. Ash of whom she was sure she knew only a tenth, if that, of his many misadventures.

He ought to have had a sidekick, she thought irrelevantly, except that Ash was his own sidekick. He knew just when to move in . . . and just when to let go. He'd gotten every girl he'd ever met to run after him, except one. The truth was, that Ash made his living off women, and that he was never going to change. The swelling in her chest that made her want to cry out his name just once, and have it be answered, was almost too much to stand.

And then there was a roar from above them.

Goodbye, Ash, she thought, as the thug in front of her knocked her flat with a single blow into the dust that was all that was left of the playground. It would have been nice to know . . .

There was an explosion of light from above them.

White light.

Like a midnight sun.

And then they were all staring upward, as if they were in a scene from *Close Encounters*, and then a hallucination was dropping down among them. You had to be awfully close to realize that it wasn't a giant, alien Christmas ornament, but a wire basket, threaded with those long-lasting green chemical lights for maximum visibility in the dusk.

Except that it wasn't dusk. There was a helicopter hovering over them, dangerously low, dangerously high. A real helicopter.

And Ash Redfern, not looking in the least lazy or lounging, was getting out of the basket.

"Get it! Get in!" Mary-Lynnette said frantically to Devi, trying to get up. Mannie—or someone—had a foot planted firmly on her own back.

But just then Mannie flew straight out of her range of vision, with a howl that showed clearly that the flying was not of his own volition. And she was picked up. In the weird green

light Ash looked—wonderful. He smiled, lazily. And then he simply swung Mary-Lynnette into the hanging, gently bobbing basket and it seemed to stiffen around her, to form a solid square.

"*You, too,*" Ash was shouting with both mouth and mind at Devi. He tried to pick her up and swing her into the Christmas-ornament basket.

"My disk!" Devi was chasing like a chicken around her computer disk, which was being kicked back and forth by scuffling feet on the blacktop.

"*Forget your disk!*"

"I can't! It may mean the future of the human race!"

Just then, though, Ash got hold of Devi and swung her up in the air like a piece of thistledown, only to land with a crash in the basket, half on top of Mary-Lynnette. Then he was yelling, again with mind and voice, "*Survivors in the basket! Good to go! Hoist basket!*"

That was when Mary-Lynnette went mad.

"No!" she screamed and then, seeming much louder to herself, **No! Ash! Ash!**

But the basket was going up, getting higher, leaving him behind in the dust. And he, the insolent boy, was smiling and waving to her as she was taken away, and he dodged a left cross from the first of two dozen stunned enemies.

Mary-Lynnette screamed again, her arms held down to him. Then she tried to swing herself out of the basket, but Devi shrieked in terror and she realized that she was putting them both in danger. And then they were too high, and nothing was any good.

For the very first time in her life, her heart got the better of her head. Everything went gray before her eyes. She fainted.

Devi

Devi clutched the disk of vital data to her chest, chanting prayers, while watching the dusty, gorgeous fair-haired boy's attempts to wake the dusty dark girl out of her faint.

He really was gorgeous, she thought, mourning a little because he was so obviously taken. He had hair that was white-blonde, and eyes that seemed to change color every time he glanced at, which was fairly frequently. But they were only beseeching glances, asking how to make Mary-Lynnette's spirit come back before it was ready, so she answered with sloe-eyed, but sympathetic, silence.

Finally, it was one of the uniformed figures who splashed water on her face. They had her wrapped in a sort of silvery cocoon they said was good for shock, and so far it seemed to be working with Mary-Lynnette's shaking.

First, her eyes flew open. Then she made a sound—an involuntary sound Devi thought—of horror and grief.

Then she saw Ash. Covered with dust as he was, bleeding from someone's lucky jab to his mouth, leaning over her where the uniformed ones had slid the ebony seats apart to give the cocoon room on the floor.

"Drink this before you try to talk," he said.

"Ach?" she said thickly, completely ignoring him.

"Drink."

Devi watched them and remembered how he had come swarming up the rope just like Hanuman the monkey-king, with the rope penduluming wildly in the wind, and how there hadn't seemed a chance he would ever get to the top before the wind tore him off. And how he had leaped into the helicopter, with her disk between his teeth like some old-time privateer. Mary-Lynnette had been long unconscious by then and the man in uniform behind Devi had been taking care of her.

Slowly, Mary-Lynnette drank.

"Something hot now?"

Mary-Lynnette nodded.

Devi would never forget either, this girl trying to climb down the rope below the basket, not least because it had put the basket in danger of collapsing around both of them.

Heroes, Devi thought, and shook her head.

Then she chided herself. The heroes had saved her, and maybe everybody left on the

planet. Her eyes filled with tears.

Mary-Lynnette was trying to sit up. Gentle hands tried to force her down and to suck at her foil of hot broth. But Mary-Lynnette was surprisingly strong. She was looking at Ash, but her eyes were clouded with dust and tears.

"—soulmate right in front of him," Devi heard when she picked up one of the earphones. "We're headed back. Diamond One out."

Devi watched unashamedly watched the lovers. Both covered with the chalky white dust, both anxious and worried.

"Here," the uniformed man, said, handing both of them flagons of water. "If you're that healthy, you can do it yourself."

A few minutes later the dark-haired girl who was washing grit off her face with water, might as well have been sparkled with stardust as she looked through the rivulets at the boy and the white-haired boy looked as if he had seen a mirage in the desert come true.

"Ash."

"Mary-Lynnette."

"You got hurt."

"It's nothing. They didn't hurt *you*?"

"Barely even touched me."

The boy looked as if he were trying for one last minute to be nonchalant, and then he had the girl in his arms.

Ash

She looked as if she had been through hell, and there had clearly been no more than seconds of safety when the helicopter dropped down . . . into *that*. No sane pilot would have dropped when the altimeter of her craft was reading practically zero, but Kourtney had done it . . . for Ash. Just the same, no rescue swimmer would have let Ash down in the basket just to hang . . . but Georgie had, for Ash.

No, Ash thought, disgusted with himself. Not for me. For her.

Still, the Night World was going to have to investigate using telepathy or soul bonds instead of the traditional visual sightings to pin down their survivors in wet or dry situations. The soulmate principle had worked its magic again.

And now he was looking into eyes that a man could drown in, and he knew that his beloved Mary-Lynnette was alive because she was yelling at him.

". . . the risk you took!

"You didn't exactly seem to be in a risk-free situation yourself—"

"How did you get that pilot to do that—"

"—batted my eyelashes and looked sweet and dumb—"

This was one too many, he saw immediately. "No, no, Mary-Lynnette, please." He slid to the floor so he could kneel and look up at her. "*I didn't know* what to do. I didn't have a plan. But then I saw you and I just knew I had to get to you. So there was this silence and then I said, I can do it by intervals of feet. And she said . . ." He suddenly changed to telepathic communication: *I can maneuver it by intervals of feet, meters, millimeters, or rat farts.*"

*And that's when you dropped down like a genuine *deux de machine* in some old Greek play.*

And Ash smiled, but said nothing more about rat's-farts. He was slowly getting it that Mary-Lynnette wanted the real Ash, the Ash who could drop the mask of sarcasm and be himself.

"Ash?" she said aloud.

"Angel," he said fervently.

"Thank you. Obviously you saved my life."

"And possibly the human race," Devi said. She tapped her the disk at her breast again.

Ash glanced at his M'Lin, and then at her friend. Then he addressed Mary-Lynnette alone. His face was seriously unhappy. *Umm . . . Mary-Lynnette? I don't know how to put*

this but . . . but . . .

No matter what, we don't have a lot of time?

Ah . . . how did you guess?

*Does it matter? Ash—do we mean a few minutes, or a few days, or—
Something in between, I think.*

.and all the things I wanted to say to you She broke off .

Mary-Lynnette

Suddenly Mary-Lynnette was back in survival mode. "Devi, you keep saying you have something that might save the entire human race. But it sounds as if a lot of cities—more than I knew about—are already destroyed. What are you talking about?"

Devi looked suddenly serious. "I know. There's nothing to do about the cities that have already been destroyed. But my mother works in Antarctica, studying meteorites. She's on vacation, right now, but she found something, something incredible. She faxed pictures of it back to her office and emailed me to get them. She told me how important they were. I figure they might fit in with what's happening right now—that somehow she got a clue or an answer or something."

Mary-Lynnette looked at Ash, who was looking doubtful. If the whole of the Night World hadn't been able to find out what was going on—or that anything had been going on at all . . .

But Mary-Lynnette guessed that Ash had learned a new and deep humility. He looked at the young man in uniform sitting across from them. "Will you inform the pilot of what we may be carrying? I know: we'll probably just get orders to come in as quickly as possible and we're already doing that. But let Sarah know that she'll have her helicopter back in the same condition it went out in."

"A little dustier, though." One of the werewolves, Lupe, had changed shape and was now human, a girl who was kind and gallant-looking, if not pretty, with striking hair the brindled color of a wolf's fur.

Mary-Lynnette realized that they were all trying to be brave, and that they were all trying to be brave for her sake. She wanted to thank them, and she realized that the best way was probably by . . . completing this mission.

"Back there," she said to Ash, lowering her voice slightly for effect. "Is that a screened-off area?"

"It is," he said, not even bothering to look. His voice was shaking slightly.

"Do you think—that for just a minute—we could—"

"I'm sure the others will entertain each other," Ash said rapidly, almost gabbling, and he took her hand and easily swung her up again. He seemed feverish as he led the way to the small area screened off for medical purposes.

Calm, Mary-Lynnette tried to think to herself. Calm. She was frightened of the synergy between Ash and herself, frightened of what it might lead to. With them, the whole was more than the sum of its parts.

Ash sat down—not slouched, not sprawled—but sat, which was a little like seeing a cat at attention, and looked at her. And Mary-Lynnette looked back. She could see the tension in his face, in his—for the moment—shadowed cobalt blue eyes. She was just about to speak when he did, and she realized that he was too focused on the moment even to see her, to read the expression on her face.

"Well?" he said. "Do me a favor will you and just say it straight out. Yes or no? Has it been enough or not? I don't suppose you know about anything else I've done—"

"Oh, Ash," she said. "Look at me. Lord Thierry himself has sent me reports on everything you've done. And if ever anyone made amendments—"

"There were times"—huskily—"when it wasn't possible to. Do you understand that? Times when the things I'd done—"

Mary-Lynnette put two fingers on his lips to stop him speaking. "They say you still act like the old Ash, full of—of bravado and vinegar. They say they wouldn't know you'd changed except that you've gone back to everyone you'd hurt before—"

"No one could do that," he said. "The living, I've had a try at."

"I've heard it all. I would have told you so a year ago, but you never came for me—"

"You never called for me!"

They smothered laughter, tears in their eyes at their first quarrel as lovers.

"Then you forgive me?"

"Ash." She was serious suddenly. She'd been warned that Ash might want forgiveness. "I can't give you that. Only the people you wronged—and some of them are dead now—can give forgiveness. But for my own part, I can forgive you; and I can ask your forgiveness for any wrong I've done to you."

"And that's asking a lot!" Ash's voice was suddenly stern, and Mary-Lynnette looked up at him, frightened.

"Where's my heart? Can you find that? Give it back to me again," he demanded, but this time she saw that he couldn't keep up the façade. "You took it, so you must have it. Or maybe you've lost it—"

"Ash! *Lose your heart?* I've lost everything else—including my family, I think"—and here she turned aside, tears coming unasked to her eyes—"but I'd swear I never lost your heart. You never gave it to me."

"I did. I did. And if I didn't, then I do. Oh, Mary-Lynnette, M'Lin, my heart. To have come so far and to end like this." His eyes were golden and filled with tears.

"This isn't what I asked you back here for." Mary-Lynnette swallowed her own tears and turned her face up. Ash wasn't much taller than she was, but he turned his face down and for a moment there was no world, no worry, nothing else except the two of them.

And it was sweet. After a moment she had to stop, with a small, caught breath.

I've missed you.

I love you.

You always made me laugh.

I love you.

I began to wonder if I would ever see you again. It hurt me so much.

Oh, Mary-Lynnette, I love you.

You're short on clever romantic responses, aren't you?

That's because I've been waiting to say one thing for so long.

They laughed, silently, against each other's lips.

"How did you manage to get there just in time?" Mary-Lynnette said finally. "It really was the last moment, you know."

"Because," Ash whispered, his lips directly at her ear, "I will always be there for you. I know how unlikely it sounds, but today I would have done anything to get to you: break down concrete walls, beg, borrow, or steal; I'd have done anything to make sure you were safe."

"Just that? That I was safe? Not even with you?"

She was teasing him, but there was a serious note behind the teasing.

He took it seriously, not smiling, returning her gaze with jade green eyes. "Not even with me. That's just the tiniest part of it. But the thought that you could be hurt, or kidnapped, or trapped, or sick—and for me not to know about it so I could try to help . . ."

Mary-Lynnette put two fingers over his lips again. "I don't know what's really going on tonight. But I do know one thing: we'll face it together." She suddenly balled up one fist and struck her thigh with it. "I could have had all that time with you—and I sent you away."

He prevented her from striking again by putting his open hand on top of her leg. "It was the best thing you could have done for me," he said, and his eyes said he meant it. And then Mary-Lynnette knew, knew for certain, that this was a different Ash than the one she had sent away; that his heart had changed, and she felt a melting in her center. The cold, stubborn integrity that would not give in to him even when she knew she loved him was melting and she was melting with it. She felt something warm rush over her whole body.

And then, when she looked at him, he was holding a ring. "You need a special insignia to get into Harmony," he said. "But I had this one made up hoping you—would accept it as a token."

It was a white flower, with each petal supporting a diamond. It was the most beautiful

thing she had ever seen. The diamonds were meant to simulate dewdrops and were graduated from tiny at the top, to seriously expensive at the bottom.

Ash, I don't have one like that for you. And it from the sounds of it I never will be able to have one made give to you.

As if that mattered. Just say you'll marry me—with a kiss.

I do! I will! But—since I met you, I've worn this. She reached up and unclasped a chain from around her neck. Slowly she drew the chain out of her sweater. On it was a man's golden wedding ring, very simple, just a band. *This is the ring my father married my mother with. He got my step-mother Claudine a different one. This one he gave to me to give to the man I married.*

Captains of ships can marry people. Why don't we ask Kourtney if it's the same for captains of airships.

Let's do it. My Ash.

My angel.

Then there was relative silence, then but not an uneventful silence. The last doubts and fears had melted out of Mary-Lynnette's heart and instead she was melting again—into Ash's arms.

"You don't have to be afraid to kiss me," he whispered against her ear. "No human blood."

"What?" she whispered back, finding this method of talking intriguing—and stimulating. "Not even from the blood bank?"

"Not even there." His breath, warm and then cool, tickled the side of her neck, and she started a little when he nipped at her earlobe.

"Not even there," he repeated, as if he knew what this did to her—but that was ridiculous: Ash's specialty was women. He'd had practice. "It's like with an alcoholic. You have to give it up entirely. At least I did."

For you. He did say it, but she knew it. She could feel her eyes fill with tears again.

And then he kissed her, with warm strong arms around her, and the tears spilled sideways into her hair.

M'lin! I hurt you.

You know better, Mary-Lynnette thought dizzily. He must know better. Much more than that and she would undergo spontaneous combustion.

And then an alarm began to ring.

At first, Ash treated it lightly.

"Go away! We didn't ask for music and you don't qualify anyway," he said, making swiping motions in the air, while Mary-Lynnette laughed through her tears. Then Ash ignored it—until suddenly the curtain to the recess was drawn back and there was Petty Officer Georgie Douglas, blushing crimson, clearly never having imagined that she would have to barge in on a laughing, crying Ash Redfern and his laughing, weeping soulmate.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "But I've spoken to Lieutenant Raleigh—that's Kourtney—and there's no mistake. We're being ordered to put down, find a landing spot—that is, to not return to base. We can't go home, and if we're chased, we may have to ditch."

"To ditch?"

"Maybe even in the pond. The Atlantic. Look, we'll all have parachutes, and there's a life raft, and—"

"And this helicopter sinks like a lead balloon," Ash said.

"Why," said Mary-Lynnette, suddenly in perfect command of herself, "why on earth would they want us to ditch after you've accomplished rescuing me?"

She was holding on to Ash's hand very tightly. And he was holding on to hers.

Georgie's face seemed suddenly to become rigid.

"There's a bogie on our tail," she said. "And they think that it's a dragon."

Ash

Ash felt his heart drop by way of his stomach to his feet. The Cynic's Creed that never quite stopped sounding in his head said, You see? Nothing Ever Works Out. It might look as

if it's going to. But in the end, it always comes down to ashes, Ash.

That was why he'd spent the first part of his life doing anything and everything he wanted and not giving a thought to concepts like Responsibility, Duty, Community Obligation, or the good old Work Ethic. Not that he was entirely sure he would have given a thought to them anyway. It just wasn't part of his personality. Having fun was. Relaxing. Taking it easy.

He'd spent the last years doing anything and everything to wipe out the evil aftereffects of the first part. All of the love of Lady Lynnette. And, yes, she would hate to hear him call her that. He had done it never quite believing that he would have his reward—that he would see the look in her eyes that he had just seen—but he had done it, anyway.

And now—give in? Give up? When he had *just* seen that look in her eyes?
Never. Never.

(to be continued . . .)