



The Darkness

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Description: All magic has a price. And now the balance is overdue. A witch with the power to see the future, Gina led a sheltered existence until the vampire, Darius Cole, crashed into her life, abducting her, seducing her, forging an emotional bond between them. Then circumstances tore them apart and the bond faded. Until twenty-one years later when they are drawn together to save their daughter. But while their passion is rekindled and the bond renewed, Gina can offer Darius nothing, and she feels his bitterness and the Darkness within him, threatening to take control. Only she has the power to draw him back, but how can she when her very life is forfeit?

Total Pages (Source): 21

Chapter One

Thunder crashed overhead, and flashes of crimson lit up the night sky, bathing the city of London in a bloodred glow. Darius Cole breathed in deeply, his nostrils flaring as he caught the acrid stench of fear drifting up from the alley ahead.

He'd been stalking his prey for an hour, but he was already growing bored with the chase. Besides, this close to mid-summer, the nights were short and dawn was approaching. He needed to finish this soon. With that thought, he loosened his control on the blood-thirst. It rose hard and fast, flooding his body, and beneath the blood-thirst, the Darkness struggled to break free. He'd sensed it often in the past week, lurking in the recesses of his mind, and for the first time in his long existence, he welcomed its presence.

Darius.

A voice whispered through his head, soft and low. He recognized her instantly, and rage surged through him. Then he shook his head. It was nothing but his imagination playing tricks on him. Again.

Gina wasn't here. Why would she be?

She'd left him twice now, the last time only a week ago. If she'd wanted to talk to him, she could have done so then, face-to-face. Instead, she'd fought at his side, and when the fighting was over, she'd walked away without a glance.

The lightning flared again, and he caught sight of his prey cowering in the shadow of

a parked truck. Darius stalked forward, no longer troubling to keep under cover. The young man's face was slack with fear, his eyes glazed, but he aroused no pity. Instead, the Darkness clawed its way a little closer to the surface.

Reaching out, Darius clasped one hand in the greasy blond hair, jerked back the head, and exposed the line of the throat. He breathed in the rank scent of terror oozing from the skin, and then he lunged. His fangs sank into the flesh and he fed convulsively, gaining no pleasure from the act but unable to stop as the Darkness gripped him.

Darius, no! You cannot take the lives of innocents.

Her voice was clearer now. This time he couldn't deny it. He raised his head, inhaling, as though he would scent her perfume on the warm night air.

Nothing.

Still, his fangs retracted, and the Darkness receded. He relaxed his tight hold, and the man slumped to the ground. Darius glanced down at him. "He deserves death," he said. "He's a pimp and a drug pusher."

But not at your hand.

He nudged the still form with the toe of his boot. The man stirred, his eyes fluttering open. Crouching down beside him, Darius stared into the terror-filled gaze. "Forget," he murmured, his power flowing out to bind his victim's will. "Now, go."

For a moment, the man peered up at Darius, his eyes unfocused, then he staggered to his feet and lurched away.

"There," Darius said, "still alive. Happy, now?"

No, not happy.

And she was gone.

He whirled around, searching the surrounding buildings, not quite believing she had left him again. But she was close. He sensed it with every beat of his heart. She was here, in the city somewhere, and he would find her.

He raised his head and screamed up at the night sky. “Where are you?”

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Chapter Two

“Just two more days,” Gina whispered into the phone. “Give me two days, then I’ll come back on my own. I swear.”

She held her breath as she waited for her sister’s reply. In the background, she could hear the howling of dogs, and her whole body tensed.

“We don’t have two days,” Regan said. “I’ve tried, but I can’t stop this. You used the earth magic and blacked out the sun. Only you can restore the balance.”

Regan was the oldest and most powerful of her sisters, and Gina had prayed that somehow, she could put things right. Now the last of her hope died. “I had no choice.”

“That changes nothing.” Regan’s tone was harsh, but beneath that, Gina could sense a deep well of anguish. “The magic is out of control, and it will get worse until you pay the price.”

“I will pay,” Gina said. “But first, I need...”

“There’s no time,” Regan interrupted. “I’m releasing Diablo and Satan. Expect us soon.”

The connection was cut. Gina stared at the cell phone clutched in her hand, then hurled it across the room. She raised her head and listened, as though she might already hear the baying of the hounds as they raced across the night sky, hunting her

down.

Regan had set the hellhounds after her.

How could she? Her own sister. But Gina knew how. She crossed the hotel room and drew back the heavy curtain. Outside, darkness had fallen, and flashes of crimson fire lit up the night sky. She gnawed on her lower lip. Regan was right—time was running out.

She dropped the curtain and sank to the floor, hugging her knees.

She would never be sorry for what she'd done. There was always a price to pay for wielding the earth magic, and she had known the consequences would be severe when she'd stopped the sunrise to save Raven's life. She'd done it anyway—no price was too high to save her daughter, and Gina was willing to pay.

Please, just not yet.

First, she needed to be certain Darius was safe.

She knew she could never see him again. She'd accepted that when she'd walked away a week ago. Actually long before that, twenty-one years ago, when Regan had found her, told her that if she stayed with Darius, then one day the vampire would kill her. That would have destroyed him. And so she'd left, not knowing she already carried his baby. Would she have stayed if she had known?

But what good did such thoughts do? They couldn't turn back time.

A week ago, after they'd helped to save their daughter, she'd wanted to stay, desperately, but how could she after what she had done? Knowing what she must soon do?

Twenty-two years ago, Darius had abducted her, seduced her, and taken her blood. In doing so, he had forged a bond between them, a bond so strong they felt each other's thoughts and emotions. That bond had faded with time, until now only a tenuous thread connected them. Then last night she had felt his bitterness and realized how close he was to embracing the Darkness. Dread filled her at the thought; it would be the end of him. He would be an outcast, hunted down by his own kind.

She'd reached out to him. He'd heard her and stepped back from the edge. Now she needed to be sure he would not give in.

A light tap sounded on the door.

Her eyes flew open; her muscles tightened. The hounds couldn't have found her yet. Then she breathed out, forcing herself to relax. After all, a hellhound wouldn't knock. Scrambling to her feet, she crossed the room and opened the door. Her breath caught in her throat, and a fierce wave of mingled delight and horror washed over her.

Darius leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his broad chest. He appeared outwardly relaxed, but the air around him throbbed with tension. A slight smile lifted the corners of his lips, but his eyes remained cold as black ice, and Gina's delight oozed away. She should slam the door in his face but was unable to move.

When she'd first laid eyes on him, she'd thought him the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen in her entire life. She'd lived for over two hundred years, and in all that time she'd never seen anything quite so perfect. His looks had changed—no longer perfect—now there was a cold, bitter edge of cruelty to his beauty, and she knew the change was due to her.

Black hair fell in an unkempt, wild tangle to his shoulders, stubble lined his strong jaw, and a vicious scar ran down his right cheek. Her finger trembled with the need to reach out and smooth away the angry line. His faded jeans hung low on his lean hips,

and a faded T-shirt stretched taut over his wide shoulders and muscular chest.

“Are you going to invite me in?” he asked, and the coldness in his voice matched the ice in his eyes. Any notion that he still harbored feelings for her disappeared in that moment.

But if he didn’t have feelings, then what did he want from her? A flash of fear hit her hard, and Gina fought it down. Once she had trusted Darius with her life, but that had been long ago. In her heart, she knew this wasn’t the same man.

His gaze roamed over her, lingering on her throat, and her fear instantly vanished, replaced by something far more dangerous. She could almost feel the scrape of his fangs, and prickles of excitement shivered across her skin. Her body quivered with the memory of the pleasure he could bring. The muscles of her belly cramped, and her insides turned molten. She could scent her own arousal on the night air and knew he could, too. He leaned closer and breathed in deeply, as though trying to inhale her.

“Pleased to see me?” he murmured.

Her gaze flashed to his face. He was making no attempt to hide his response, his eyes darkening to black, gleaming under heavy lids. He looked like a hunter who had scented his prey, and he was starving for her. The breath caught in her throat once more, and her blood thickened until she could feel it pulsing through her veins.

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She'd forgotten the way he made her feel. Although that wasn't entirely true. The truth was she'd known she would be unable to get through the long years alone, with his memory haunting her at every step, so she'd built defensive walls around those memories. Now the walls were crumbling. She shook her head, forced herself to ignore the feelings, gather her self-control around her like a cloak.

She licked her lips. Opened her mouth. Closed it again.

He frowned, then lifted his head to scan the room behind her, and her hand tightened on the door, ready to slam it in his face if he made a move to enter.

"Invite me in," he said.

She shook her head again.

He raised an eyebrow. "Can't you speak? Somebody cut out your tongue?"

She swallowed, trying to ease the tightness in her throat. "What do you want, Darius?"

"At this moment, to come in and..." He paused, his eyes running over her body again. This time she was ready and steeled herself against any response. "...talk to you about old times."

"I don't remember the old times."

"Really?" He sounded as though he didn't believe her. "Well, we'll talk about new

times then.”

“I don’t want to talk about new times.”

“You might not, but I do.”

The sound of voices drifted down the corridor, and Gina jumped. She peered around Darius. A couple of girls were walking toward them—young, pretty, and vivacious. Their steps slowed as they caught sight of Darius. They whispered to each other as they stopped by the door of the next room along, taking too long fiddling with the key card, and casting sideways glances at his tall, indolent figure.

Gina glanced at his face. He was watching them, a speculative look in his eyes, and something hardened inside her. The two girls finally managed to open the door and disappeared inside with a last longing look in his direction.

He turned back to Gina. “Perhaps they would invite me in.”

“No doubt.”

He looked after them thoughtfully, eyeing the closed door. He licked his lips, and her eyes narrowed. “Do you really want me to eat the neighbors?” he asked.

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.” He smiled showing the tips of his fangs. “You know what I’m capable of. I could drain them dry and still come back to you for more.”

She shook her head. “What is it you want, Darius?” she asked again.

“Invite me in.”

She remembered then that he couldn't enter without her invitation, couldn't cross her threshold. If she closed the door on him, he could do nothing about it. Except go to the next room. She glanced at the closed door where the girls had disappeared. Did she believe he would coldly slaughter them?

She rejected the idea with her whole heart. If he hadn't been able to kill a drug dealer and a pimp, he wasn't going to kill two young girls just to teach her a lesson. However, he might very well go next door and have his way with them, and she wasn't any happier about that. Less so, she realized with an unpleasant jolt. She knew he was quite capable of taking their blood, sating himself in their bodies, and wiping their minds of the whole thing. A vision of him flashed in her mind, his golden limbs tangled with theirs, and the thought of that happening made her want to go drain them herself. Or turn them into toads.

"You're thinking too hard," he said. "Just invite me in, sweetheart."

Her eyes flicked to his face at the endearment, but she could read nothing from his expression. She gave him one last, long look, then shifted to the side. "Come in," she muttered.

He smiled and stepped past her into the room.

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Chapter Three

Gina closed the door and stood for a minute, her forehead pressed against the cool, smooth wood. When she turned, Darius was prowling the hotel room, examining everything, picking up her belongings, holding them to his face, putting them down again.

It was actually a suite of rooms, consisting of a comfortable sitting area and a large bedroom. It didn't take him long to circle the entire sitting room; she didn't have many possessions. He came back to stand in front of her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, almost gently.

She frowned. "Shouldn't that be my question? This is my room."

"That wasn't quite what I meant." He sank down onto the sofa and patted the seat beside him. "Come and sit with me."

"I'd rather stand."

He tilted his head to the side, considering her intently, but didn't argue. Instead, he relaxed against the cushions, his arms stretched out along the back of the sofa and watched her through half-closed eyes. "I presumed, when you disappeared so quickly, that you'd gone back to your sisters."

"No."

“Well, obviously not. I think I’d notice if the old harridans were hidden away here.” He sniffed the air. “I’d smell them.”

She almost smiled at his words. He’d never liked her sisters, and to be fair, they hadn’t done anything to make him like them. Quite the opposite, in fact. Now, Gina turned away to hide the wave of anguish washing over her at the memory of all her sisters had done.

Her eldest sister, Regan, had always been like a mother to her, and she was quite aware that Regan would have happily killed Darius twenty-two years ago. Gina had stood in her way back then, but Regan’s bitterness had festered until she was willing to use anything, including Gina’s daughter, to settle the score.

It had taken her a long time to forgive her sister, but in the end, Gina had come to accept that Regan had only done what she believed was needed to protect her and Raven.

Now Gina was beyond even her sister’s protection.

She turned back. Darius still watched her, and she shifted under his gaze, uncomfortable. She looked around the room, searching for something to say. “Would you like a drink?”

His eyes darkened even more. “Are you offering?”

His gaze flicked back to her throat, and she realized what she’d said. Heat rose in her cheeks, and her mouth went dry. “I’ve got beer in the fridge.”

“Spoilsport,” he murmured. Then he shrugged. “A beer would be good.”

She got him a bottle from the minibar, and then took one for herself; it would give her

something to do with her hands, something to hide behind. She handed him the opened bottle, then stood in front of him, not sure what to do. Though there was one thing she desperately needed to know. Did he have news of Raven? Her heart softened as she thought of their beautiful daughter. It would make it all worthwhile if only Raven were safe and happy.

“Tell me about Raven,” she said. “How is she?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe you care?”

“Just tell me.”

He shrugged. “She’s fine. Better than fine. She and Kael were married five days ago. As you would have known if you’d stayed around after the fight instead of taking off.”

Gina ignored the comment. She couldn’t have stayed; it was impossible. She would have only caused more hurt to her daughter if she had. But something relaxed inside her at the news of Raven’s marriage. Kael was a good man, a shape-shifter and head of the Council. He had risked everything to save Raven. Now Gina would trust him to keep her safe.

She opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment, a dog barked in the distance, and her gaze flew to the window. She knew it was a dog, not a hellhound, but it reminded her that her time was running out. She didn’t want Darius anywhere near when they found her. Even a vampire as old as Darius might be no match for a pair of hellhounds.

She had to get him away from her and soon.

“For God’s sake, relax,” Darius muttered. “I’m not going to leap on you.” He gave

her a long look out of those dark eyes. “Well, not unless you ask me very, very nicely.”

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Darius watched her reaction to his words. She was nervous, her eyes flickering to the window, her whole body jumping at every sound.

Gina was afraid of something, and if she feared him, then she was only being sensible. However, he was aware that fear was not the only reaction she was feeling to his presence. She was also aroused, and that was as far from sensible as it was possible to get. He could scent the perfume of her arousal in the air, and his hunger was rising.

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That, combined with the anger that had simmered beneath the surface for the past week, made a dangerous mix.

His cock was already hard, and sex had been at the forefront of his mind since he'd first seen her. Now his gums prickled with the need to feed. He longed to do both. Only force of will kept him sitting here when what he wanted to do was pin her down and take her in every way possible.

But he didn't dare touch her, not while the Darkness still ate at his mind. He could feel its lingering pull, waiting for something to set it free.

He took a sip of his beer and let his gaze wander over her face and body. What had she done to herself? She'd always been slender, but now she was almost gaunt. Her skin was pale, and she'd cut off her hair at the shoulder. That was recent; a week ago, it had hung down to her waist. The shorter style suited her, though, showing off her high cheekbones and emphasizing her enormous eyes. She could have passed for human, if not for those. Witch's eyes, silver rimmed with black, gazing at him, unblinking, until he was sure he could sink into them, lose himself in her soul.

No doubt she'd kick him out fast enough if he did.

She hadn't wanted him before, and she didn't want him now. She had made that very clear. What had he thought when he'd seen her last week? That she had come for him? He was a fool.

The old pain gripped him again, but he wouldn't give in to it. Instead, he allowed his anger to rise, because anger was easier to bear.

“How did you find me?” she asked.

He glanced up at her question. “What?”

“How did you know to come here?”

“When you spoke in my head, I knew you must be somewhere close, so close I could almost smell the sweetness of your blood.” He leaned toward her and breathed in again.

Gina flinched, but stood her ground. “You’re not supposed to be here,” she said.

His eyes narrowed, and the anger crept a little higher. “Where exactly am I ‘supposed’ to be?”

“Anywhere. Not here. You have to go.”

Panic laced her voice, and he looked at her curiously. “Are you going to make me?” he asked, allowing a small part of his anger to leak into his voice.

He knew she’d heard it. The little color in her face fled, and a savage wave of satisfaction washed through him.

She wrapped her arms around herself, searching his face. “I’m going to ask you,” she replied.

He laughed, genuinely amused. It occurred to him then that his little witch had no idea what he was feeling. Perhaps he’d become too good at masking his emotions. Maybe she needed to know something of the rage seething inside him. “You can read my mind?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Just an impression of what you’re feeling if I concentrate very hard.”

“Then try, little witch.”

Her eyes widened in surprise, but a moment later, he sensed the gentle brush of her mind against his and opened to her.

She paled even further and took an involuntary step back. “You hate me.” The words were ripped from her, a statement, not a question. She stared at him, her eyes wide and bright with unshed tears.

It was a trick. He knew it was a trick. Why would she expect anything else from him after what she had done?

“What did you expect?” he said. “That I would still love you?” He rose to his feet and took a step toward her. She backed away until she was up against the wall and could go no farther. Something in her face warned him to get a grip, leash his anger before it overwhelmed him, but it was too late.

He flew at her then, his hands gripped her shoulders and the force of his attack slammed them both into the wall. He pinned her there with one hand at her throat and stared down into her hauntingly beautiful face.

“I could forgive you for not loving me,” he snarled. “I could forgive you for leaving me without a word, but I will never, never forgive you for what you did to our daughter.”

Her eyes widened at his words. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but then closed it again. Some expression passed across her face, acceptance maybe. She relaxed in his hold, quiescent.

Do what you will.

The words reverberated in his mind. Briefly, his fingers tightened until he felt the blood throbbing in her throat. Her silver eyes glowed with power, but she made no effort to release herself, and something snapped inside him. Darius stared down into the face that had haunted his dreams since his first sight of her. He knew, in that moment, she would never come to harm at his hands. He forced his hunger down, and after a minute, he loosened his grip. Let his hands fall to his sides.

He'd wanted Gina from the first moment he'd seen her. He'd worked for the Council back then, fighting in the war against the fire-demons. The war had not been going well. Everyone knew witches possessed the power to see the future, and Darius had wanted to go to them for guidance. Kael, as head of the Council, warned him they were not to be trusted, but as usual, Darius had gone his own way, and there he'd seen Gina.

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He could clearly remember the shock ripping through him as he'd stood before her; speechless, unable to do anything but stare. He'd never wanted anything as much in his entire existence, and he'd been so used to taking what he wanted that he hadn't thought twice about snatching her away.

They'd had three glorious months together, and she had come to love him. He was sure of it. Right up to the day she walked out without a word. He'd been angry, then hurt, and finally bitter, but those feelings were nothing compared to how he'd felt when her sister, Regan, turned up eight months later and presented him with his daughter, Raven.

Regan had refused to speak of Gina, just handed the baby to Darius and then told the Council of the prophecy made at Raven's birth. It foretold that if either the Council or the fire-demons sacrificed his daughter on her twenty-first birthday, then they would gain a great victory over the other side. Kael had been furious, and he'd acted in anger, passing a sentence of death over the baby.

Darius had believed Gina knew all this, and his bitterness turned to rage, but still he'd wanted her.

He had taken his daughter and run, then spent the next fourteen years hiding from both sides. But after the fire-demons captured Raven, he had returned to the Council, knowing they were his only hope of finding his daughter. Kael, consumed with guilt over his earlier sentence of death on an innocent child, had agreed to help, and for years they'd searched, but it was only through Gina that they'd finally managed to find and save Raven. She'd fought back to back with him, and afterward she had disappeared. Again. That was a week ago.

But this time, when he'd gone hunting, he had found her.

Her tongue came out to lick her lips, and he almost reached for her again as heat coiled in his stomach. She swallowed, and his eyes riveted to her throat, where he could see her blood pulse so close to the surface, smell the sweetness of it.

"Would it make you feel better?" she asked, and her voice was soft and low.

His gaze flew to her face. "What?"

"If you kill me, will it lift the Darkness from you? Will you be as you were before we ever met?"

He imagined her dead, and pain ripped through him. She couldn't die. He wouldn't let her. She was his. "No!"

Shock flashed across her features, and she reached out a hand. Darius stepped back and turned away.

"Darius?"

He forced himself to turn back to her. There was some expression on her face. Pity. He didn't want her pity.

"What?" he growled.

She flinched at his tone but didn't back down. "I can do a spell," she said.

"A spell? What sort of spell?"

"I can make it as though we never met. You will forget I ever existed."

“No!” The word was torn from him.

“I would not want to forget you either.” They were both silent for a minute before she spoke again. “I didn’t know.”

“What didn’t you know?”

“About Raven and the prophecy. I didn’t even know she was alive. My sister told me our daughter died at birth. She lied to me.” He could hear the pain of betrayal in her voice and knew she spoke the truth.

“Where were you?” he asked. “I searched for you, but I couldn’t feel you anywhere.”

“I was banished to the Shadowlands.”

Shock washed over him. “I thought they were a myth.”

“No, the land where the souls of the dead gather before their final journey definitely exists.”

“Sounds like a fun place.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I had fun there.” She shook her head. “At first it didn’t matter. After I left you, I was...” She shrugged. “It wasn’t so bad there. Before you came, I’d lived my whole life in isolation, with just my sisters and the occasional visitor who came to seek a vision of the future. It wasn’t much different.”

“Have I mentioned that I hate your sisters?”

“Once or twice,” she said, “but you don’t understand. They have a great responsibility. No, we have a great responsibility. Anyway, Regan released me about

five weeks ago.”

Darius frowned. “Why would she do that?”

“I don’t think she ever believed things would go so far. She couldn’t risk the fire-demons sacrificing Raven, but no one could find her. Regan hoped we would have a bond, and once free of the Shadowlands, I did sense our daughter. I felt her pain and knew she was alive.”

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Chapter Four

Gina glanced at him. He was deep in thought, but the rage had left his face.

No wonder he hated her. All this time he'd blamed her for what happened to Raven. He'd also said he could forgive her for leaving him, but suddenly she needed him to know she hadn't abandoned him lightly.

"I didn't want to leave you," she said. "That first time. I had no choice."

"No?" He sounded skeptical.

"It was daytime when Regan came. We were in your room, deep underground. You were sleeping." He'd been naked, beautiful, gilded in the light from the lamp she kept on so she could watch him.

Darius scowled. "And it didn't occur to you to wake me?" She almost smiled at the disgust in his voice. "You didn't think I could keep you safe?"

He still didn't understand. "You didn't have to keep me safe. Regan is my sister. She would never hurt me. It was never me who was in danger."

His eyes narrowed into dark slits as he processed the information. "You went with her to protect me?"

She nodded.

“I can protect myself,” he growled.

Gina wondered how much she should tell him, how much she should reveal of their powers, but he had already seen what she could do. “Regan threatened to destroy you.”

“How?”

“She was going to open a portal to the outside, the sun would have entered, you would have been destroyed utterly, gone forever, and it would have been my fault.” Gina had a flashback to the terror that had pierced her insides as Regan had issued the threat. “We have a saying in my family—take what you want and pay for it—and I would have been willing to pay, but not with your life.”

“You still should have woken me.” He looked at her. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

She nodded. “Regan told me she’d seen a vision of the future. That one day you would take my life.”

“And you believed her?” His eyes were narrowed on her and shock was clear in his tone.

“Of course. The visions do not lie.” But now she had to accept that her sister did. She’d lied when she’d told Gina her baby was dead. Had Regan lied about that vision, as well?

He shook his head as though he couldn’t accept her words. “I would never hurt you.”

Gina took a step toward him, reached out a hand and ran her finger over the scar bisecting his cheek, as she’d been longing to do since she’d first seen it.

“How did you get this?” she asked.

“After the Council called for Raven’s death—”

A jolt of shock hit Gina. “The Council wanted Raven dead? But Kael was head of the Council. Why would he order her death?”

“He was furious with me for taking you, and he thought it was the only way to ensure the prophecy could not come to pass. He told me later he’d regretted the decision almost immediately, but it was too late. I’d taken Raven and run.”

“How can you defend him?”

“I’m not, but I understand why he acted as he did. Nevertheless, if we’d had the Council’s protection, the fire-demons would never have found us. As it was, they did, and I got this”—he gestured to the scar—“in the attack when they captured Raven. They left me for dead out in the open, where the sun would find me. Luckily, I woke before dawn.”

“I’m sorry.” There was one last thing she wanted him to know. She was aware he blamed himself—that everyone blamed him—for her abduction all those years ago. “I have a confession to make.”

“You do?”

She nodded. “The day we met, I watched you arrive.”

A shadow of a smile crossed his face. “And did you like what you saw?”

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“I did. That day, my sister Catrin was supposed to meet with you. But I begged her to let me instead. So you see, in a way it was all my fault. I chose you.”

“I’m glad.”

She laid her hand against his cheek. His skin was cool to the touch, or maybe she was hot. He turned his head so her palm brushed his lips. His tongue snaked out, licked the tips of her fingers, and pleasure ran through her, settling at her core.

The intensity shocked her. She went to take a step back, but his hand reached out and clasped hers. He brought it back to his mouth and kissed the sensitive skin of her palm, then the inside of her wrist, tracing the blue veins where her blood throbbed close to the surface. The action was so tender, tears pricked at the back of her eyes.

Vampires couldn’t love. That’s what Regan always said. Gina tried to hold on to the idea, but it was slipping away.

His other hand wrapped around the back of her neck, and he tugged her toward him. His fingers spread in her hair, cradling her skull, ruffling the silky strands. “I miss your hair.”

“You do?” she asked, and a moment later, long silver tresses reached down to her waist.

“Clever,” he said. “Is it real?”

She sighed. “No, it’s a glamour. A cheap trick.”

“Not like blacking out the sun.”

“No, not like that. That had to be real.” She shuddered as she remembered the terrifying moment when the sun had risen, and she’d thought they were too late to save the daughter she’d never met. Raven was half vampire—the sun’s rays would have burned her to ashes—so Gina had extinguished the sun for the time it took them to save her. It was powerful magic and came with a high price—a price she had yet to pay—but she knew she would do the same again. Now, she pushed the memory away. If this was all she was going to have with Darius, she didn’t want to spoil it.

His hands held her still as he lowered his head. She made no move to evade him, her whole body rigid with expectation.

Their lips met.

She’d forgotten what it was like, one more of those things she had buried deep in her subconscious as too painful to remember. His lips were soft. His tongue licked at her lower lip, then his teeth nipped until her mouth opened beneath his, and his tongue filled her, slick, wet, velvet. The taste of him flooded her, pushing everything else from her brain as his mouth hardened against hers.

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She was so incredibly soft, and the taste of her was driving Darius wild. His fangs throbbed with the urge to feed, and the hunger rose in his belly. His cock was already rock hard, and his balls ached viciously. He shifted, trying to ease the pain, but he knew there was only one thing that would do that. He needed to be inside her, deep inside her. He slid his hands down her back, cupped the globes of her backside and pulled her against him, pressed her softness against the hardness of his shaft, and she groaned into his mouth. He drank the sound down.

He picked her up without breaking the kiss, strode across the room with her in his arms, and lowered her to the sofa. She was so beautiful. His gaze ran over her body, over her nipples pressed against the soft material of her T-shirt.

“Take off your top.” His voice sounded hoarse in his own ears.

She peered up at him, her eyes glowing silver. Holding his gaze, her hands clasped the hem of her T-shirt and she wriggled out of it, tossed it to the floor. She was naked underneath, and he feasted on the sight of her.

Her breasts were small, with dark red nipples already swollen with need. He trailed his fingers over the engorged peaks, watched them pucker and tighten. He pinched one between his finger and thumb, and her hips rose from the cushions.

He came down beside her then, needing to feel her against the length of him. He shifted lower down her body, and his face nuzzled her tender breasts, his tongue flicking over one tight nipple until it glistened with moisture. He drew it into his mouth and suckled, careful that his fangs didn't cut into her flesh, but desperate for the taste of her blood.

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Gina was boneless, a mass of sensitized nerve endings. His mouth tugged at her nipple, slowly melting her insides. She could feel him hard against her, and her sex was hot and swollen with need. Her hands slid under the worn material of his T-shirt to the satin skin beneath, her nails raking his back. She lifted her hips, rubbing herself against him, and he went still above her.

He released her breast and raised himself so she could look up into his eyes, so dark now they were almost black, glittering, burning with a hunger she knew matched her own and beyond. His gaze shifted to her throat, and he reared up above her. His lips

drew back, his fangs gleaming white against the darkness of his skin. She realized what he meant to do, knew she had to stop him, and the need broke through the fog of desire holding her captive. If he fed, the bond between them would be renewed. He would feel her thoughts, know the truth, and would never let her go. Not without a fight. A fight she could not let him win.

“No!”

For a moment, she was sure she'd left it too late, that he was beyond control. She could see the force of his will, his powerful shoulders rigid with tension as he held himself poised above her. He looked savage and wild, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

His fangs retracted, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were back to normal, though tension throbbed in the air. He moved slowly, first onto his knees, then rising to his feet to stand beside the sofa, staring down at her. He raked a hand through his long hair, and finally, the tension drained from him. “Why?” he asked.

She pulled herself up and hugged her knees to her chest, hiding her naked breasts. “You feed, and the bond between us will strengthen.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“When we part I can’t...” She paused, gathering her thoughts, careful of what she revealed to him. “When we part, I can’t exist if I feel you all the time.”

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His eyes narrowed on her. “When we part?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“Regan is coming for me.”

Gina didn’t mention the hellhounds, though she wasn’t sure why; maybe she didn’t want to scare him off completely.

“When will she be here?”

Gina shrugged. “Tomorrow, maybe tonight, I don’t know, but she’s searching for me, and she will find me. Besides, I was always going back. I just wanted to see something of life before—” She broke off and swallowed. “I have to go back. This was only ever a break from reality for me.”

“Reality? Well, change reality. You don’t have to go back. I can keep you safe from your sister. She can manage without you.”

Her anger rose then. “You understand nothing of what we do. Do you think we were brought into existence merely to perform party tricks at your command, to give you pretty visions of the future? That is nothing. We have duties to perform, without which the world would descend into chaos.”

“What duties?”

“We lead the souls of the dead away from the land of the living. Without us the world would sink under their weight. Besides...”

“Besides?”

She got to her feet, crossed the floor, and drew back the curtain. The room was instantly lit with the crimson flashes. “This is because of me.”

“I don’t understand.”

How could he? “Magic has to be paid for,” she said. “Oh, not the glamours and tricks...” She gestured to her long hair, and it vanished. “They cost nothing. But proper earth magic has a price. I had to use it to black out the sun—that was the only way I could save Raven. But now the world is out of balance. This”—she gestured at the night sky—“will get worse until I have paid.”

“Paid how?”

“I don’t know the details,” she lied. “Perhaps I will have to return to the Shadowlands.” Well, at least that was the truth; she had no doubts she would be visiting the Shadowlands very soon.

“Do you want some company?”

Panic flared inside her. “You cannot follow. It is forbidden.”

His eyes narrowed. “One day you will come back?”

“Perhaps.” She forced a smile.

He was regarding her curiously. “Have you seen our future?”

Gina frowned at the question, then shook her head. “No, I haven’t had a vision of the future since before Raven was born. I think my gift may have passed to her.”

“Yes, Kael mentioned she has the sight.”

“Then I pity her.”

“There’s no need. She’s happy now with Kael, and besides, she’s strong.”

“I hope so. She’ll have to be.”

“So,” Darius said. “Where does this leave us?”

She turned away from him, schooled her expression to grimness. He needed to understand this. “There is no us,” she said, turning back. “There can never be an us. Tonight is all we have.”

He stared at her for a minute longer, his expression blank. “Then I think I’ll forgo the evening’s entertainment. If I just wanted sex, there are plenty of willing partners without the problems. Maybe they’re still up next door.”

He turned from her and walked out. The door slammed shut behind him. Gina stared at it without seeing, a desperate urge to call him back rising within her. She bit her lip to stop the words from tumbling out.

Running to the door, she opened it and caught sight of his figure disappearing down the stairs. Something relaxed inside her. She didn’t know what she would have done if he’d gone next door.

She started shaking then. Sinking to the floor, she curled into a ball and wept.

Chapter Five

It took Darius all of about one second to realize he'd behaved like a complete shit.

He hadn't meant it. He could no more go to another's bed than he could physically hurt Gina. No, he'd said it to cause her pain, and he'd succeeded. The shock had been clear in her face, and he'd wished immediately that he could take back his words. Instead, he'd walked away.

If he'd believed causing her pain would lessen the anguish that ripped through him, he'd been way off course.

The truth was, he'd seen the love in her face, knew she wanted him, and he could still feel her, soft and willing beneath him. For a brief moment, he'd allowed himself to believe there could be a happy ending, and because of that, her rejection had been the bitterest of blows.

Still, the knowledge that she hadn't betrayed him, hadn't betrayed their daughter, was like a huge pressure lifting from his mind. He realized the Darkness had retreated; he no longer felt as though he was balancing on the edge of a precipice. The hatred had drained from him, leaving him empty.

He wanted to go back, say he was sorry for hurting her, but the hunger still gnawed at his stomach. He couldn't confront her again until he had himself under control, but time was running out. How much did she have? She'd told him not long. A day? A few hours?

He walked through the city streets, the crimson lightning flashing overhead, mocking him, reminding him at every step of all he had lost.

Finally, he entered an all-night bar and sat down, oblivious to the stares of the humans. The bartender placed a whiskey in front of him and Darius sipped the drink, wondering where to go next. What to do.

Above the bar, a TV flickered to life, showing a news report and a picture of the night sky, rent by flashes of deep red lightning.

“Scientists have been unable to determine the origin of the current weather phenomena.”

Darius could have told them.

He wanted Gina with every part of him, and he knew she wanted him. But if she could be strong enough to do her duty, then perhaps he should learn from her.

For a long time he sat drinking, staring into space, working out how to pick up the pieces of his life and move on.

Maybe it was time to stop wallowing in self-pity, as Kael had told him, and get back to work. There were always fire-demons to kill, if the Council would take him back. Darius would fill his time waiting for her return.

First, he had to see her one more time.

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When the knock came, Gina almost didn't open the door. She didn't believe for one minute that Darius would be back. He'd made his feelings clear. Only after the third

round of knocking, when it turned into hammering, did she rise to her feet.

She opened the door slowly, her eyes widening as she took in the tall figure on the other side. He'd changed his clothes, and her eyes widened further at the sight of him. She'd never seen him in anything other than casual dress. Now he was wearing a dark gray suit that fit his tall frame to perfection, and a white silk shirt open at the neck, contrasting with his golden skin. His hair was pulled back into a ponytail, emphasizing the high cheekbones. His sensual lips curled into a slight smile.

He looked alert and shifty, as though he was hiding something, and he kept his hands behind his back. As she stared at him, openmouthed, he brought them forward and offered her a single red rose.

She blinked in bewilderment, then shifted her gaze from the flower to the man holding it, unable to look away.

"May I come in?" he asked when she continued to stare.

"Can I stop you?"

"All you have to do is say no."

She considered it for a millisecond. She glanced again at the flower. No one had ever brought her flowers before. She opened her mouth again, but couldn't think of a thing to say, so moved to the side and gestured for him to enter.

He nodded once, then stepped past her. She shut the door behind them and turned to face him. He held out the rose. "This is to say I'm sorry."

"You are?" She blinked again, in confusion. "For what?"

He shrugged. “Take your pick, but mostly for the way I left earlier. I was...” he paused as if searching for the right word “...disappointed. You can blame my oafish behavior on that.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “I won’t change my mind.”

“I don’t expect you to. I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give, for however long you’re willing to give it.”

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A thrill of excitement ran through her at his words. She'd believed it was over. That she would never see him again, and the thought had very nearly torn her apart. Now she had a chance to be with him one last time.

She reached out and took the rose, raised it and breathed in the rich perfume. When she looked back up, Darius was watching her.

"I want to make love to you," he said. "You know that?"

She nodded.

"Good. Now put the flower down. I need to hold you. Then I'll take you out, wherever you want to go. We never did get to go on a date."

She laid it on the coffee table and moved into his arms. Burying her head in his chest, she pressed her face against the silk of his shirt, wrapping her arms around his waist as though she would hold him forever and never let him go. His arms went around her, pulled her closer, and for long minutes they stood entwined. After nowhere near long enough, he sighed, then kissed the top of her head, and she released him and stepped back.

She glanced down at her jeans and T-shirt; they didn't seem right when he looked so stunning and sophisticated. But she was a witch, wasn't she? She whispered a spell and a moment later stood before him in a slinky crimson dress the color of fresh blood. It skimmed her slender body, clinging to her small breasts and reaching midway down her thighs. Her feet were in crimson stilettos with straps that wrapped around her ankles. She imagined her hair down to her waist, and instantly the heavy

weight tipped her head back. Darius was staring at her, hunger burning in his eyes. Her own hunger rose in response, tightening the muscles in her abdomen, turning her nipples to hard little peaks pressing against the thin silk of her dress.

She looked up to find him gazing at her breasts. He cleared his throat. “Do you have anything on under that?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Wait and see,” she teased.

His eyes glittered, dark and hot, and his hands clenched at his sides. “I’ll wait, little witch, but not for long.”

He stretched out a hand for her then, but she skipped out of his reach. “I thought you were taking me out?”

As she watched, he fought for control, gained it with difficulty. He held out a hand to her. “Then let’s go.”

She curled her fingers into his palm. “Where are you taking me?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Show me the city. Show me how people live.”

Thirty minutes later, they were riding on the London Eye, a huge wheel that took them high over the city. Suspended in a glass capsule, the two of them alone, Gina sipped from a glass of champagne and gazed out across the night. For long moments she stared, taking in the vastness, so many people all pressed in together.

“So there it is,” he murmured. “The city of London. For one night it’s yours.”

“It’s beautiful.” Turning to him, she found him not looking at the view but at her. She trembled under the heat of his stare and stood motionless while he took the glass from her hand and placed it on the nearby table. Then he took her in his arms. He leaned over her, burrowing his face in the soft spot where her shoulder met her neck.

For a moment she tensed, but he merely grazed her neck with his lips then trailed kisses up her throat to her mouth. He placed more butterfly kisses across her lips. They tingled, darts of pleasure shooting through her. He was teasing her and she needed more. She dug her fingers into the hard muscles of his upper arms, pulled him closer, and he kissed her as they hovered high above the earth.

“So,” he said, dragging his lips from hers, “What do you want to do next, shopping, food...” he punctuated each question with tiny nibbling bites of her lower lip. She could feel his kisses at her breasts, between her thighs and she pressed her body against his. “...dancing.”

He had shown her the city and it had been wonderful. But she had seen enough. If she had only one night, she didn’t want to waste it. She was suddenly conscious of time running out; dawn was too short a time away, and all she wanted was to be alone with him. She dropped her arms from his shoulders and stepped away.

“Darius,” she said, “where do you stay?”

He caught her gaze, and something passed between them. Taking her hand, he led her to the edge of the capsule, then pointed down into the jumbled mass of buildings.

“Just about there,” he murmured.

“Will you show me?”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded.

It was another fifteen minutes before they returned to the ground. Darius didn't kiss her again, but he held her close, with her back against the length of his body, and pointed out the things they could see. She could feel the tension in his body, the hard line of his erection pressed against the softness of her bottom.

They walked without speaking. The streets were quiet now, and it didn't take them long to reach the building. The office block was in darkness. Darius let them in through a side door, and they took the elevator down into the basement. A steel door closed behind them.

Gina peered around her with interest. Looking at this place, she could see why he wasn't impressed with her room. This was huge, the décor very modern with clean lines and lots of pale wood. The floors were wood scattered with colored rugs, and she slipped off her sandals and dug her toes into the softness of the wool.

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“Is this where you live?” she asked.

“Not for a long time. I stayed here with Raven before she was taken by the fire-demons. After that I lost my taste for the city, and besides, most of my time was spent out hunting for her. I couldn’t face this place; it had too many memories.”

He took off his jacket and laid it on the back of the black leather sofa, then released the band that held his hair. He ran his hands through it so it fell to his shoulders, dark as night. She watched the play of muscles under the thin white shirt, her fingers itching to stroke the dark body hair shadowing his chest.

He crossed the room, poured them both a drink, then came back and sank down on the sofa. He patted the seat next to him. She came and sat in the crook of his arm and he pulled her tight against him.

“I enjoyed myself,” she said. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “Well, you know, it occurred to me that I’d never taken you out before. The first time, when I took you from your sisters, we didn’t exactly get out and about much.”

“No,” she murmured. They had spent most of the time in bed. It had been glorious, and her body tightened at the memory. But she felt no rush. Here, now, safe in his arms, it seemed inevitable that they would consummate their love. As though nothing could stand in the way of something so right.

Somewhere out there in the night, the hounds were hunting her, but something told

her they were not that close yet. She snuggled closer at the thought, and his fingers stroked down the soft skin of her arm.

Chapter Six

How did you make love to someone when it might be the last time, and you wanted to show her what she meant to you?

Darius stared down at the woman in his arms.

She had been an innocent the first time. He remembered his shock. A two-hundred-year-old virgin—who would have believed it? He'd known she'd led an isolated existence; witches tended to keep to themselves. But it had been a surprise. She'd learned quickly, but still, he'd been careful of scaring her. He'd always held something of himself back. Tonight, he wasn't going to hold back anything.

Except no feeding.

He could do it. However much he wanted to taste the sweetness of her blood, he would not. He suspected she didn't trust him, and why should she? Perhaps she believed if the link was strengthened, he would come looking for her.

She was right.

They were wasting time. "Let's go to bed," he said.

She looked into his face and nodded. Rising to her feet, she held out her hand to him as though she was the one leading the way. He took it and stood up. Then lifted her effortlessly in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He put her on her feet and tugged at the thin straps holding up her dress. "I love this gown," he said, "but it's

coming off.”

“It is?”

He nodded. He was about to remove it when the dress vanished, leaving her naked but for a crimson thong. She was perfection. Long and slender, but her body honed, with graceful lines of muscle showing beneath the pale skin. He reached out a hand, stroked her shoulder, cupped one small, sweet breast in his palm and ran his thumb over her nipple, and it darkened under his touch. She swayed, and he moved his hand lower, tracing a finger along the mark above her left hip bone. It was black, stark against the paleness of her skin, and shaped like a bird, wings outstretched. He remembered the first time he had seen it. He’d known immediately what it was, what it signified. It was the mark of the Morrigan. Still, he’d had to ask.

“Your mother is the Morrigan?”

Gina had nodded, and shock had ripped through him—her mother was a goddess. And not just any goddess, but the goddess of war and pestilence.

Now he rubbed his thumb over the mark and wondered what other blood ran in her veins. “You never told me,” he said. “Who’s your father?”

“I don’t know, but according to Regan our mother has terrible taste in men.” Gina smiled. “She reckons that’s where I get it from.”

Darius snorted. “Yeah, and I love your sister too.” He looked at her. “What’s she like? The Morrigan, I mean.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never met her. I told you, she left me with my sisters when I was a baby. I used to wonder what she was like, and I used to pray to her. She never answered, and I gave up praying years ago.”

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Her words were a lie, but Gina had no wish to tell Darius that she had spent much of the last week praying. What was the point? There had been no answers; her mother had remained silent, as always. Gina reached down and took his hand in hers, pressed his open palm against the mark. “This is all I have from my mother.”

A tension ran through him. She was sure he meant to pull away, and panic flared inside her. She wanted this so much it was like a live thing tearing at her insides, ravenous, demanding to be fed. Her hips pushed against him, and his hand relaxed beneath hers. His fingers flexed, then pressed into the flesh of her stomach, sliding over her skin to slip beneath the tiny scrap of satin that was all that covered her. They ruffled through the soft hair, then moved lower, curling upward, probing, searching.

She knew the moment he realized how much she wanted him. His breath caught as his long fingers slipped between the folds of her sex and sank into the hot, slick heat. He went still for a moment, and then leaned forward and kissed her. A slow drugging kiss, his tongue filling her mouth, while his fingers stroked the swollen, sensitized flesh, massaging the hard little nub until her legs gave way and she clung to him for support. She closed her eyes tight, concentrated on the feel of his fingers moving against her. The pleasure intensified, radiated outward, and then exploded in a shower of lights that flashed behind her closed lids.

“Oh!”

He laughed softly against her mouth, then drew back, picked her up and dropped her onto the huge bed behind her.

She opened her eyes. He was standing over her, staring at her nearly naked body while he stripped off his own clothes. He didn’t bother unbuttoning the shirt, just ripped it open, tore it off, and dropped it on the floor. He was beautiful, his chest

broad, with a covering of dark silky hair that narrowed and ran down the muscular ridges of his lean abdomen and disappeared into the waistband of his pants. He was already hard; the outline of his erection clear beneath the material. Her mouth went dry, and she held her breath as his hand moved to the fastener. He flicked it open and slowly drew the zipper down. She started to breathe again as he slid his pants down over his thighs and stood before her naked.

His skin was golden, his legs strong columns, his cock long and heavy, springing up from a nest of midnight curls. It twitched and pulsated with life under her hot gaze, and she came up on one elbow, reached out and curled her fingers around it. He gasped, and she tightened her hand, loving the feel of his burning-hot, silky soft skin over the rock-hard shaft.

“Easy, sweetheart,” he murmured, and she loosened her grip, her fingers fluttering up over the long length of him, then down to cup the heavy weight of his balls.

He groaned again, dropping down onto the bed beside her. She released her hold, her hands moving to his shoulders to drag him closer. Darius pulled her against him, cupping her buttocks in his palms, then rolling her so she lay beneath him. Lowering his head, his lips took hers in a savage kiss of possession, and she opened her mouth, welcomed the scalding thrust of his tongue.

He ripped the thong from her body, and for a moment stayed poised above her. He inhaled, his nostrils flaring as they drew in air heavy with the musky scent of sex. His hands tangled in her hair, and he held her still beneath him.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he said. “In my dreams, in my waking moments.”

She stared up into his face. He was fierce, predatory, his lips drawn back, exposing the sharp whiteness of his fangs, but she knew no fear.

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One of his hands moved between them. He parted the folds of her sex with sure, skillful fingers, and her body tightened in anticipation. Then the head of his cock was nudging, seeking entrance to her body, finding it. She could feel herself softening, opening for him. Even so, when he plunged inside her, sheathing himself in one hard lunge, she gasped in shock. He went still above her.

“Okay?”

She nodded. He filled her completely, but soon her body adjusted to him. She twitched her hips, and he pulsed inside her, growing even larger, and she moved again. He closed his eyes as if to savor the moment. When he opened them, they glittered, filled with a hunger he made no effort to hide.

He moved then. The first thrust was a long slow curl of his hips, and she lifted up to meet him. She knew the exact moment when he released the hold he had on his control. Felt it snap. He plunged into her hard and fast, so all she could do was hold on. Her nails dug into his shoulders, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

He rode her hard, driving them both toward their climax, ruthlessly taking everything she had to give. With each lunge, the pleasure rose until the whole world was reduced to nothing more than the feel of him moving on her, in her.

Already sensitized from her orgasm, each thrust of his cock, each roll of his hips brought an exquisite, dragging pleasure that finally spilled her over the edge.

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She shuddered beneath him. Darius went still, staring down into her silver eyes, which glowed with power.

Mine.

The word echoed through his mind as she claimed him. He gave one final thrust and spilled himself inside her, holding her tight as they both rode the wave of pleasure.

He stroked her, soothing her as the tremors racked her body. When she finally lay still beneath him, he raised himself and kissed her, long and slow.

Still lodged deep inside her body, he rolled onto his side, pulling her with him, tucking her close so he could watch as she lay limp and boneless against him.

While his body was sated, his gums ached with the need to feed, but he had sworn he would not make the future harder for her. If it was easier to forget him, then forget him she must.

She opened her eyes.

“All right?” he murmured.

“I don’t remember it being quite so overwhelming,” she said, pulling away from him. For a moment he held on to her, then let her slip away. She didn’t go far, just backed up a little and lay watching him.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. I just want to look at you.”

Darius rolled onto his back. “Then look,” he said.

She inched closer, rose up on her elbow and let her eyes wander over him. Pulling herself up, she knelt beside him and reached out to touch him on the shoulder.

“You’re so hard,” she said, her fingers sliding down to tease the fur on his chest, scraping across his nipples. Darius closed his eyes as her hand trailed over his belly, and ripples of pleasure ran through him. Her fingers stilled, and he opened his eyes again to find Gina staring at him.

He held his breath as her hand hovered over his cock. She leaned over, blew gently, and he had a sudden blood rush to the groin. He could feel himself stirring beneath her gaze and lay back and enjoyed the feeling.

“It’s like magic,” she whispered.

“Witch’s magic.”

Her fingers touched him, lightly at first, grazing along the hardening length, fluttering over the head, then down to stroke him. It was heaven.

He was hard again now. She leaned over again, her warm breath washing across him. Then she kissed him. He jerked beneath her, and she sat back.

He looked up to find her staring at him in speculation. She leaned down and took him in her mouth. His hips reared up off the bed as she suckled the head. He was almost bursting when she sat back again.

Darius forced himself to remain still, but it was an effort when every fiber of his being yearned to toss her onto her back and plunge into her again.

After a moment, she moved toward him. He waited, his breath caught in his throat, as she decided her next move. In the end, she flung one long leg across his hips and

straddled him. He reached out for her, but she shook her head.

“It’s my turn,” she said. “I want to do this.”

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He lay back and put his hands behind his head. "I'm all yours, honey."

She kneeled over him, placed the tip of his cock at the hot, slippery entrance to her body, and then sank down onto him.

Darius held her steady with his hands spanning her waist while he shunted up the bed, until he was leaning against the headboard. She was wrapped around him, so hot, so tight that he had to fight for control. His arms slid around her to cup one full buttock in each palm, massaging the globes, widening her stance and pressing her down so he was buried deep inside her. He rocked her gently against him.

"Oh," she murmured, her eyes widening as her most sensitive point rubbed against him. She placed her palms on his shoulders and started to move on him, lifting herself, then sliding down, and with each stroke he held her closer, his hips rotating in tiny circles against her. Her eyes drifted closed, and he watched the play of emotions crossing her face.

This time, it was a slow, beautiful buildup of pleasure. Shivers rippled through her body as he ground her hips down onto his. He held himself in check, wanting to give her pleasure. Finally, when he was sure he could control the need no longer, her inner muscles contracted around him and tremors shuddered through her body.

She flung back her head and screamed as the pleasure tore through her. He pulled her hard into him again. As she spasmed against him, he let himself go, his own pleasure ripping through his body, and he burrowed his face in the softness of her breasts and filled her with his seed.

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Gina kissed him, tasted the salty tang of sweat gilding his skin, and nuzzled her face into the silky body hair. She could feel the slow, steady thud of his heart beneath her. It soothed her, and she started to doze off.

She shook herself awake, not wanting to waste this time they had together. She realized she knew almost nothing about Darius. After he'd abducted her, they'd had three months together, but during that time they'd lived for the present, too busy making love to talk about their past or their future.

She rested her chin on one hand and looked at him. "Tell me about yourself," she said.

He stroked a hand through her hair. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything." She thought for a minute. "Where were you born? When were you born?"

"I was born in Greece, not far from Athens. Around two thousand years ago."

She sat up. "You're that old? That makes you almost as old as Regan!" Gina stared at him for long moments, then opened her mouth to ask how he had become a vampire and closed it again.

She went still, then cocked her head to one side, listening, trying to convince herself she'd imagined the sound, but it came again. The howl of a hound. They had picked up her trail. Her stomach churned, her breath catching in her throat.

Please, not yet.

“What is it?” Darius asked.

He couldn’t hear the hounds, but that didn’t make them less real. It was over.

“I thought we had longer,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Chapter Seven

“What is it?” Darius asked again.

She lifted her head. They were so close now. “Can’t you hear them?” she asked.

Across the room, the air shimmered and wavered. She held her breath as a portal formed, and a pair of hounds leaped through, snapping and snarling.

Darius shot upright. “What the hell are they?” he said, staring at the creatures standing poised, red eyes glowing, low growls trickling from gaping jaws. They were so close she could smell the fetid stench of their breath.

“Hellhounds,” she said.

They were huge creatures. Bearing only a vague resemblance to dogs, they stood almost shoulder high, with rough, russet coats and a thick black stripe down their backs. Powerful legs ended in long, savage claws. Their heads were misshapen, with pointed ears and razor-sharp teeth.

Darius rolled off the bed in one fluid move. Keeping his eyes on the hounds, he reached down, picked up his pants, and pulled them on, then placed himself between the hounds and Gina.

“No, Darius!” She stumbled to her feet, clumsy in her need to protect him. He carried no weapons. Even a vampire couldn’t last long against the hounds under those conditions.

“Get back,” he snarled.

“They won’t hurt me, Darius.”

He ignored her, pushing her behind him. “Can you get me a weapon?”

A moment later, a long, silver dagger appeared in his hand. He nodded his thanks but didn’t turn. “Just stay out of the way.”

She frowned but stepped back. She whispered another spell, and she was dressed, a knife in her own hand. She would intervene if she was needed. The hounds wouldn’t harm her; at least she was pretty sure they wouldn’t. They belonged to her sister Regan, and they knew Gina.

She bit back a gasp as the first of the hounds leaped for Darius. Its talons raked his shoulder, and the sharp, metallic scent of blood filled the room. He growled, his own fangs showing as he reached out and gripped the rough fur of the beast’s head. He raised the knife high as the second hound pounced, and he crashed to the floor under the combined weight. She stepped toward them, knife raised.

“Stop!”

Gina whirled around. Her sister Regan stood at the portal. Gina shot her a furious glare, then turned back to the fight. Neither the hounds nor Darius had taken the slightest notice of the command. The knife flashed crimson now, and one of the hounds was hurled across the room. It lay quietly, but Gina could see the heaving of its flanks. The other was still rolling on the floor with Darius.

“Regan, call your hound off,” she said sharply. “If you want it to live, that is.”

“Diablo!” Regan snapped.

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One minute the hound was fighting for its life, the next it went still. Darius lifted the knife, but something held him back. The animal stared at him, and then whined softly. Darius met its red eyes, and their gazes locked as it backed slowly away. He lowered the weapon.

He rose to his feet, the knife dangling from his hand, ready if he needed it. He glanced across at Gina, needing to know she was still safe.

A woman stood beside her—tall, beautiful, with Gina's silver witch's eyes and long, dark-red hair that hung like a cloak to her waist. Darius recognized her immediately, and a flash of hatred gripped him, only to be washed away by a wave of despair. This was the end. She was here to take Gina away, and like the last time, Gina would go with her.

He glanced down at himself. He was covered in blood. Some of it was the hound's, but more of it was his own, and he couldn't seem to care. The knife dropped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. What was he supposed to fight?

He caught Gina's gaze and saw the same anguish reflected in her eyes. For a brief second, a savage wave of satisfaction washed through him, but it passed quickly, and he knew he would do anything to take that sadness from her.

He turned away. Picking up his shirt, he used it to wipe the blood from his shoulder. The cuts were deep and stung viciously, but he relished the pain.

"Darius," Gina said softly. She reached out a hand to him, then dropped it, as though she, too, knew the futility of any gesture at this point. "This is my sister Regan."

"Oh, we've met," he said, keeping his voice clear of emotion.

“You have?”

She wrinkled her brow, and he realized they had never spoken of his visits to her sisters. “I went to find you, after you’d disappeared the first time. She”—he nodded at the redhead, who was bent over the fallen hound—“threatened to set the dogs on me. Then later, she brought Raven to the Council.”

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Gina frowned. Her sister hadn't told her that Darius had come looking for her all those years ago, but then, why would she? Or that she had handed Raven over in person.

Regan was crouched beside the hound, her hand stroking its huge head, and he struggled to his feet, sides heaving. The hounds were the only creatures she had ever known Regan to show affection to. Now she turned to stare at Gina, accusation clear in her face.

"He's hurt."

"Well, it's your fault," Gina muttered. "You shouldn't have sent them."

"You gave the vampire a knife."

She glared at her sister. "What did you expect me to do, stand by and watch while they ripped him to pieces?"

"Yes," Regan hissed. She stood up and whirled toward Darius. She raised her hand, and Gina knew she was going to release magic that would destroy him forever. Gina stepped between them.

"Stop it," she said.

Regan looked at her, but her hand remained poised to strike. "We should have

finished this years ago.”

A soft growl came from behind her, and Gina knew it was Darius. She glanced at him. With his whole body radiating tension, he stood poised to leap. Maybe he would make it. Maybe he could get to Regan before she released the magic.

Then what?

There was no good way for this to end. Gina didn’t want either of them to die, and she had accepted her own fate long ago.

She put up both hands, palms out, one facing Darius, one Regan.

“Stand down. Both of you.”

Regan stared at her through narrowed eyes but lowered her arm. Gina turned to Darius. He nodded once and stepped back. The tension drained from his body, and acceptance dulled his dark eyes. She reached out and touched him gently.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She wasn’t sure what she was apologizing for—the hounds, her sister, for coming into his life and ruining it forever.

He looked at her, his eyes bleak. “So am I,” he replied. He walked away from her and sank down on the edge of the bed, the blood-soaked shirt clenched in his fist.

Gina stared at him, trying to imprint his face on her mind. Then she turned back to her sister and drew herself up tall. She knew Regan loved her. She had cared for Gina her whole life, brought her up when their own mother had abandoned her as a baby, but it was time her older sister learned that Gina could be pushed only so far.

“I’m coming back with you because I know my duty, not because you are forcing

me.” Her voice rang cold in her ears. “I’m willing to pay the price for what I did but know this. If you lay so much as one finger on him, I will disappear.”

Regan watched her carefully. Her eyes flicked from Gina to Darius, as if weighing the risk. “It wasn’t hard to find you this time,” she said.

Gina shrugged. “You can send the hounds after me, they can drag me back, and you can do what you must. But remember, a payment given freely is worth far more than one taken.”

“You would force me to do that?”

“Yes.” Gina knew, in that moment, that she spoke the truth. After all, she was the daughter of the Morrigan, goddess of war and pestilence, and a part of her knew that if Darius died, she would let the whole world burn and not care about the consequences.

She allowed the truth to show in her eyes.

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Darius looked at her, and despair flooded him. A moment ago he’d stood poised, knowing he could take her sister before she could speak the spell. Then there would have been nothing and nobody to stand in their way.

Gina’s words had stopped him. He realized now that he had always thought of her as vulnerable. He’d clung to the idea that she needed protection. His protection. In the deep recesses of his mind he’d believed she was going back only because her evil sister was forcing her. She’d spoken of duty, but he hadn’t believed it.

Now he saw her clearly. She was strong, powerful. She was going back because it

was the right thing to do. She would take on the world to protect him, but she wouldn't be his.

His gaze flicked to her sister. Their gazes met, and he saw the same knowledge reflected in her face, and knew he was safe from her attack. The thought brought him no pleasure.

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“I won’t touch him,” Regan said. She turned to Gina. “Come now, we must go.” She clicked her fingers, and the hounds came to her, whining softly, nudging at her hands.

Darius forced himself to sit unmoving, not to call out to Gina. He was so used to taking what he wanted, but now he must let her go. He had to be strong for her. At the last moment, as they stood at the portal, Gina hesitated.

“Wait,” she said to her sister. “I need to say good-bye.”

Regan nodded once, then backed away to stand by the portal, the hounds at her side.

He watched as Gina walked toward him. Her beauty tore at his heart.

“What?” he asked. “Tell me what I can do for you.”

She swallowed, then reached out and touched his cheek. “Forget me,” she said.

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t even if I could.”

He took her hand, kissed her palm. It wasn’t enough, and he tugged her toward him. When she didn’t resist, he dragged her closer so she tumbled across his lap. He held her against him, feeling her heart beating against his. Then he lifted her chin, baring the long line of her throat.

He could see her pulse thundering beneath her skin. He kissed it softly. She stiffened in his arms and then relaxed, going boneless and languid. His fangs ached, and he knew she wouldn’t stop him, but instead, he kissed up her throat, along her jaw, his

lips settling on hers, his tongue slipping inside to taste her. His body hardened against her as hers grew softer.

Finally, he forced himself to pull back and look into her strange eyes one last time. They were soft with longing.

“I will never forget,” he said, and released her.

She rose to her feet, swayed slightly. He reached out a hand to help, and then let it fall. She turned and walked away, glancing back over her shoulder once.

Mine.

The word echoed through his mind, and then she was gone.

Her sister stood staring at him, hatred stamped on her face. She turned to follow Gina, but Darius needed to make one thing clear. “She’s mine, not yours,” he said. Regan paused. She glanced back over her shoulder, and he continued. “When she comes back, we will be together. However long, I’ll wait.”

Regan’s eyes narrowed on him. He’d always believed her cold, entirely without feelings. Now she allowed him a glimpse of the pain that lay behind the coldness. “You don’t understand, do you?”

A wave of foreboding washed over him. “Understand what?”

“Gina is never coming back.”

“You can’t banish her forever.”

“Banish her? If she told you that was the payment due, then she lied.” Regan looked

at him, and something close to pity crossed her features. “No, Gina’s life is forfeit. Her death is the price. She dies tomorrow night.”

Shock ripped through him. He stared, unable to speak.

“That is what you have brought her to, Darius Cole. This is your fault.” Regan turned back to the portal.

Darius stumbled to his feet. “Wait,” he said. “There must be some way. Take my life as payment.”

She ignored his words and took the final step.

“Come back,” he screamed. “Tell me what I can do.”

A single word echoed back as the portal closed.

“Pray.”

Chapter Eight

Darius stared at the spot where Gina and Regan had disappeared. The portal had vanished, leaving only the lingering scent of ozone hanging in the air.

He wanted to believe Regan had lied, but he'd seen the truth in her eyes. Forcing down the panic, he went over everything Gina had told him. She'd cleverly hidden the truth, speaking in half lies, and he'd believed her. Now it was too late. A scream of pain tore through him. It couldn't be over. She couldn't die. He wouldn't allow it!

He left the room, heading for the elevator. It took him up to the roof of the building. As he stepped out into the hot night air, crimson lightning still flashed across the sky.

He'd never been one to pray, even before he'd lost his soul. He'd always taken whatever he wanted and to hell with the consequences. Now he would pray. He would make the gods listen. He sank to his knees. And prayed for a way to save her.

My life for hers. Whatever it takes... Just tell me how to save her.

A shadow passed across the moon, and he glanced up as a huge crow swooped down and landed on the wall beside him. Darius rose to his feet as it watched him, head cocked on one side, yellow eyes bright. It hopped down to the floor, and a moment later, a woman stood before him.

She was tall, slender, with long black hair threaded with crow's feathers, and silver eyes rimmed with charcoal. Her skin was smooth and olive-toned, her face was marked with curling runes radiating out from the corners of her eyes, and she wore a

band studded with rubies around her upper arm.

She was beautiful, yet something about her made him step back and widen the distance between them.

She smiled. "Darius Cole, I presume?"

He nodded, watching her warily, and her smile widened. "Do you know who I am?"

"I can guess." He looked her over carefully. "Am I supposed to kneel or something?"

"No, but perhaps a little humility would not be amiss."

He thought about it for all of two seconds. "I'm not very good at humility," he said.

"No, I'd heard that about you."

He stared at her. Had she come to answer his prayers or had Gina's family decided to finish him off, after all? He remained silent, waiting.

She was still studying him in return, head cocked on one side like the bird she'd appeared as. "You know," she said, "I have often been accused of being an unnatural mother, of not caring for my children. I suppose there is some truth in that, but while I have never involved myself in their upbringing and their lives, I have not cut my ties with them entirely."

"Are you going to help us?" he snarled.

"Such impatience. I can see why you wind up Regan so much. Then again, I can also see the attraction." She ran her eyes over the length of his body, and his skin prickled. "I've never had a vampire," she mused. "I always thought they'd be too much

trouble, but maybe I should give it a go. Maybe I would like you to kneel for me, after all.”

He growled low in his throat.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said, “you’re already spoken for.”

“I am?”

Her eyes narrowed at that. “Aren’t you?” she asked. “I was under the impression my daughter had claimed you.”

Something close to hope flickered to life inside him. Darius pushed it aside. Hope was a wasted emotion. What he needed was action. “Tell me what I can do,” he said. “Tell me how to save her life.”

“You cannot. Her life is forfeit. She must die to return the world to balance.”

Rage surged through him. “Then why are you here? To taunt me? To tell me I am to blame?” He turned away, fists clenched at his side. “I don’t need to be told—I already blame myself.” The Darkness was rising inside him. He forced it down and turned back to face her. “Why did you come?”

“Because you asked me.” She considered him, her eyes boring into his soul. “What are you willing to do to be with my daughter?”

He answered without thinking. “Anything.”

“And what do you think Gina is willing to do, to be with you?”

He frowned at the question. “She will not risk the world.”

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“Well, that’s good. But beyond that?”

“Beyond that, I believe she would risk anything.” He shrugged, then gritted his teeth. “Goddamn it, tell me what to do.”

She sighed, as if impatient with his slowness. “You are a vampire?”

His eyes narrowed in frustration. “You know that.”

“And what must one do to become a vampire?”

He closed his eyes. At last, he understood. “You have to die.”

Darius stood on the clifftop, high above the sea. The tang of salt filled his nostrils; the crash of the waves sounded in his ears. The stone circle loomed stark before him. It lay in ruins, many of the great stones fallen and overgrown, but the hum of magic still radiated from the place. The Morrigan had told him Gina would come here tonight. She’d take her own life here, among the stones, in payment for saving their daughter.

He leaned against one of the rough stones, shoved his hands in his pockets. All he could do now was wait, but panic clawed at his insides. What if she wouldn’t agree? What if he was wrong and she didn’t love him enough to risk her soul? What if she would rather die than become a vampire?

Then again, what if she agreed, and he failed? The transition didn’t always go smoothly. Many died and were not reborn if the vampire’s blood was not strong or the recipient was too weak. Darius gritted his teeth. He would make it work.

He caught a glimpse of movement beyond the rim of the stones. He straightened. Gina was here.

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The night was warm, but Gina shivered as she followed the narrow track up the steep hillside. Fear gripped her mind, and only force of will kept her feet moving forward, one step at a time.

The stones came into view, and she paused. She was nearly there now. It was almost time. She closed her eyes and tried to picture Darius, but fear clouded her mind. Some part of her wished he had fed from her one last time and strengthened the bond between them. It would have been good to feel him now, as the end drew near, but that wouldn't have been fair. This way, he would eventually forget, move on with his life.

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. The lightning was almost constant now, illuminating the ring of stones that stood on the crest of the hill.

She walked on, finally stepping between two huge fallen rocks to stand within the circle. The flat altar stone lay before her, and the air throbbed with magic. Gina's hand slipped down, her fingers stroking over the ceremonial dagger at her waist. She would use it to open her wrists. The blade was sharp, it would be painless, and her life would simply drain away.

And she would never see Darius again.

Her whole being screamed against that thought, and in her mind, she sensed a faint flicker of response. She whirled around.

Darius?

A tall figure separated from the dark shadows of the standing stones. He walked toward her. She could sense his fear and, beneath the fear, an eagerness she did not understand. Had he come to try and stop her? He couldn't know what she was about to do.

He halted a foot away, so close she could reach out and touch him. Her hands clenched at her sides. "What are you doing here?" He looked at her for long moments, and she saw the pain in his eyes. "Oh God," she said. "You know?"

"Regan told me."

"She had no right."

He shrugged. "I asked her what I could do. She told me to pray." Gina frowned, but he continued. "I didn't believe I would be heard, but your mother came."

Gina started in shock. "I—"

He put up a hand. "Hear me out," he said. "She told me there was nothing I could do to prevent it. You must die. But..." He paused, ran his fingers through his hair. He appeared unsure about how to go on.

"Tell me," Gina urged.

"There is a way for us to be together."

She searched his face. He'd said she had to die. Did he mean to die with her, then? Her whole being rejected the idea. "I will not allow you to take your own life."

He stared at her intently, searching her face. "Then will you allow me to take yours?" He looked deep into her eyes. "Are you willing to become a vampire to stay with

me?”

Gina’s brain stopped. Then she was flooded with thoughts, all clamoring in her head. To be a vampire. She would lose her soul but gain Darius for all eternity. Was it possible?

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Something struck her then. “Regan told me you would one day take my life. Could this be what she saw?” She was finding it hard to take in. “My mother suggested this?”

He nodded.

“Will it be enough? Will the price be paid?”

“She said so, but you must know the consequences. You will lose your soul, never see the sun again.”

It didn’t matter. A wild surge of hope was building inside her, and she knew then that she would rather have the night with Darius than the daytime alone. “I’m willing.”

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, she saw the same hope reflected in his face. He reached out for her, and she slipped her hand in his and allowed him to lead her to the altar.

“What must I do?” she asked.

“Your body must die. I’ll drink from you until your heart stops beating, then you must take my blood to be reborn. Will you accept my blood?”

She nodded once.

He pulled her into his arms and sank down onto the soft grass, leaning his back against the altar stone. She lay across his lap, and for a minute, he held her close.

She'd thought she would never be in his arms again, and it was almost enough, but not quite.

Raising her head, she bared her throat, and heard his sharp intake of breath. Then his mouth was on her, his fangs piercing her skin, sinking deep into the vein.

He drank. There was no pain, only pleasure and a relentless tugging that drew on places deep within her body. As he drank, she could feel his thoughts and emotions growing stronger. His fear that he would not succeed and she would truly die. His love.

Her life was ebbing away, and she needed to tell him something before it was too late.

I love you. I've always loved you.

He paused as he heard her words in his head. She clutched his shoulders, squeezing to urge him on, and he continued drinking. Her mind was clouding, his thoughts fading, then blackness.

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Retracting his fangs, Darius pressed his lips to her throat. He could detect no pulse. She was dead, her heartbeat silent. Standing up, still holding her in his arms, he laid her gently on the altar. He looked up, and found the lightning was gone, and the sky was at peace. It was done.

Gina's hair was silver in the moonlight, her face serene. He leaned over and kissed her cold lips.

Ignoring the fear that squeezed the air from his lungs, he drew the dagger from the sheath at her waist, tore open his shirt and sliced the blade across his chest, above his

heart. As the crimson blood welled up, he gritted his teeth and prayed it would revive her. He scooped Gina up against him and pressed her mouth across the open wound.

For endless minutes, she lay still in his arms, and his panic flared. Desperation filled him, and he knew in that moment that if she did not recover, then the rising sun would find him here still cradling her body. But it wouldn't happen. He pressed her tighter still. "Come back to me, Gina," he whispered. "I love you."

A convulsion shuddered through her body. She swallowed, weakly at first, then more strongly, as each beat of his heart forced his blood from the wound.

I love you.

The words whispered through his mind, and suddenly he needed to hear them for real. He tilted her head with the hand in her hair. "Say it out loud," he growled.

She licked the crimson blood from her lips. Her mouth opened, and he saw the flash of small, white fangs.

"I love you," she said.

Elation filled him, and the Darkness was gone forever, banished by her love.

The End