



The Prophecy

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Description: Whoever sacrifices the virgin, Raven Cole, on her twenty-first birthday will achieve a great victory in the war between good and evil. That's bad news for Raven. Half-vampire, half witch, and cursed from the moment she was born, Raven has been a prisoner of the fire-demons for the last seven years. Now, as her twenty-first birthday approaches, time is running out. Kael Hunter believed he would do anything to stop the fire-demons from winning. Until he saw her. Now, rather than kill the alluring vampire himself, Kael has another plan: to prevent the prophecy by taking Raven's virginity. But Raven is prepared for death not seduction. Can Kael use their one night of passion to convince her she has a future – and that he should be a part of it?

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Prologue

Nearly twenty-one years ago

How had it come to this?

Regan had no clue, but she couldn't turn back now.

The building was not what she'd expected, adding to her unease. A modern office block deep in the business district of the city of London. All around her, the air was filled with the constant clamor of traffic, and the fumes assaulted her nostrils. She longed for home. Soon. Shifting the baby in her arms, she banged her clenched fist on the door.

Her niece was restless, letting out little mewling sounds. She was no doubt hungry. Regan couldn't bear to look at her. If she looked, her heart would break, and she would run as fast and as far as she could away from this place.

And she needed to do this. She couldn't keep her niece safe. She'd searched and prayed for a different way forward but had come up with nothing. So she would give the child into her father's care, and the care of the Council, and hope between them they could keep her from harm.

For a minute nothing happened. Then the door swung open from the inside and a man stood there.

"I'm expected," she said.

He nodded and gestured for her to enter. She brushed past him, and then waited so he could lead the way across a marble-floored reception area, through a door, and down a set of stairs which took them to below ground level. Finally, he stopped in front of metal door. “You may enter.”

Regan took a deep breath, tightened her hold on the baby.

At the last moment, doubts flooded her mind. Were her anger and bitterness driving her to do this? To hand an innocent baby to a monster. At the thought, she almost turned away, but the door opened from inside, and it was too late.

Besides, this way, there was at least hope.

And she could live with the guilt. She’d done it before.

Stepping into the room, her gaze fixed on the two men, standing close, heads together. Both tall, their figures tense, jaws locked. She had an idea they’d been arguing, but now their focus shifted to her. A common enemy. The intensity of their stares burned into her.

She forced herself to look first at the man on the left, tall with golden hair and eyes the color of the summer sky. Kael Hunter, the head of the Council, a shapeshifter, and the last of his race. She met his stare and didn’t flinch at the hatred in his eyes. He blamed her for the death of his people. And maybe he was right to blame her. She’d done what she needed to do.

But didn’t she always?

The thought had a bitter flavor.

“Where is she?”

At the words, she turned her attention to the other man, and loathing seethed through her blood. Darius Cole, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and no soul. She cursed the day he had come into their lives. From the expression on his face, she suspected her hatred was reciprocated. Like she gave a damn what he thought. He looked behind her, as though her sister might appear as though by magic.

Never going to happen.

“Gina’s gone,” she said. “Where you can never find her. But she left something for you.”

His gaze dropped to the bundle in her arms, and he went completely still, his eyes widening. He took a step forward then halted, searching her face. “A child? Gina’s?”

“And yours.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe you. This is some trick. Gina would never abandon our child.”

“But then what do you really know of her? You were with her for three months. I’ve known her all her life. She’s gone, and the child remains.”

Regan had seen a vision. Darius would kill her sister. He claimed he loved her, but could a vampire really love? Blood-sucking monsters. The thought sharpened her resolve, and she uncovered the baby’s face.

Darius stepped closer. Reaching out slowly, his finger stroked the baby’s cheek, his face softening from its harsh lines, wonder in his eyes. She stilled under his touch.

“She has her mother’s eyes.”

Witch's eyes. But she also had her father's dark hair and white skin. No fangs yet, but they would doubtless come with time.

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“Her name is Raven, and she is cursed.”

His hand dropped to his side and he stared at her. “Cursed?”

“I had a vision. It foretold a prophecy.” Closing her eyes, she recited the words. “Whosoever shall sacrifice the virgin Raven Cole on her twenty-first birthday shall win a great victory, a final victory, surpassing all others, and their enemies shall fall before them.”

“You’re lying.”

Suddenly the strength drained from her. “Why? Why would I lie? I know you hate me, but I would give anything for this not to be true. She’s my niece, my blood. But I can’t protect her from what will come. Others will have heard this prophecy. They will hunt her down. You said you loved my sister. So protect her daughter. I give her to you.”

And she thrust the baby into his arms and turned and ran. Before they could see the tears burning her eyes.

She was a daughter of the Morrigan, and she never cried.

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Chapter One

Kael Hunter stared down from his perch high above the cavernous hall.

Beneath him, through a pall of ochre smoke, he could make out a score of fire-demons. Their leader, Sorien, sprawled on a huge chair and, standing next to him—so still that at first Kael thought she was a statue—was Raven Cole.

At the sight of her, something stirred deep inside him. The sensation took him by surprise. He'd expected to feel guilt, probably pity, but not this burning sense of recognition and longing.

She was tall, her hair a coal-black cloak around her shoulders, dark against the stark whiteness of her skin. She wore a black tank top and faded jeans, and she was slender to the point of gauntness. Her arms were fastened tautly behind her, chained to the stone pillar at her back. Her head was bowed, her eyes closed.

Sorien stumbled drunkenly to his feet, and she raised her head, her eyes flashing open. She had witch's eyes, huge, haunting, the irises the palest of silver rimmed with charcoal.

And staring down into that hauntingly beautiful face, Kael realized he was in trouble.

He had come here hoping to save her but prepared to kill her if that was needed to prevent the prophecy from being fulfilled. People had been known to lose their minds in the dungeons of the fire-demons. If that was the case, and she wouldn't—or couldn't—cooperate, then he would consider her death a release.

Now, with only one short glance, he knew that her death at his hands was no longer an option.

Shit.

Directly in front of Raven, the body of a young man hung lifeless. Sorien stopped beside it, grabbed a handful of blond hair and tugged back the head. He swore viciously and dropped it in disgust.

“Dead,” he muttered. He swung round to face Raven. “What are you staring at, witch?” He took a step toward her and she stood up straighter, bracing herself for the blow she obviously knew was coming.

Sorien lifted one huge fist and slammed it into her stomach. The force drove her backward into the stone pillar, but she was held upright by her chains. She hunched over against the pain, then slowly straightened. She stared up into Sorien’s face, and this time her eyes were not expressionless. They were filled with hate.

“I’m glad he’s dead.”

Sorien had turned away. At the woman’s soft voice, he swung round. “What did you say?”

“I said, I’m glad he’s dead. He’s free of you.”

“Unlike you, my pretty.” He stroked a hand down the flawless line of her cheek, over her throat. His fingers tightened on her, the claws digging into the soft flesh, and he twisted viciously.

This time she couldn’t hold back her sob of pain, and Sorien smiled, his hand dropping to his side.

“What?” he asked. “Were you not pleased with your present?” He glanced again at the dead man. “We brought him here for you. He died because of you.”

Her eyes closed briefly; when she opened them, they were blank once more. “You murdered him.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “it will be your turn soon. Another month and I’ll see you dead and the prophecy fulfilled.”

“Are you so sure of that?” She smiled, showing sharp white teeth. “Do you want to know what I’ve seen in your future, Sorien, king of the fire-demons?”

“Be silent, witch.”

“Or what?” she asked, the scorn clear in her voice. “You’ll kill me? I don’t think so. Not yet anyway. No, I think you’ll listen to what I’ve seen in your future. It won’t take long, because you know what? You’re going to die real soon. And you’re going to die screaming.”

“Shut up!”

She laughed softly. “Do you want to know how you die? I’ve seen it, and I can tell you...if you like.”

Up on his perch, a shiver of awe ruffled Kael’s feathers. It had been rumored she’d inherited the sight from her mother. But she was only fourteen when the fire-demons had captured her, too young to have it confirmed.

“It’s going to be messy, Sorien. Very, very messy.”

Sorien raised a clenched fist and backhanded her across the mouth. Blood spurted

from her lips, dripping crimson against her white skin. Her small, pointed tongue flicked out and licked at the blood while her eyes remained fixed on the fire-demon. She smiled again.

“Soon, Sorien,” she crooned. “Your end draws near. Did I mention the screaming bit? Really loud. Like ear-splitting loud.”

The fire-demon backed away from her then. “Get her out of my sight,” he roared.

Kael’s muscles tensed with the need to swoop down, to free her from this place. But if he wanted to save her, he had to bide his time.

He glanced out of the window. The sky to the east was showing faint traces of light; dawn was approaching. They would have to remove her from the hall before the sun rose, but he had her scent now and would find her. With one final lingering glance, he launched himself from the beam and swooped out through the open window.

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Chapter Two

Be strong, Raven. Do not give in to despair.

Raven woke to the utter darkness of her underground cell with the words lingering in her head. A woman's voice, a stranger's voice, soft and low, and Raven gritted her teeth against the fury it stirred.

"Piss off," she muttered under her breath.

She wasn't strong. And she was tired of pretending she was when her whole body was racked with pain and her first feeling on realizing she was still alive was despair so intense it twisted her guts.

She had long ago learned to deal with the pain of the frequent beatings, and she'd come to accept the idea of her death as inevitable. Raven even believed in some shadowy place, deep within her soul, that she deserved to die for the innocent blood she had taken.

No, it wasn't the pain or the thought of death that tore her apart, it was the knowledge that Sorien would benefit from her death. If Sorien won a final victory, she had no doubt there would be a reign of terror on the earth beyond all imagining.

And it would be her fault. She'd been cursed from the moment of her birth.

Gritting her teeth, she tugged at the chains that shackled her to the wall. She wasn't going anywhere, and she hated the sense of powerlessness. However much she

taunted Sorien, pissed him off, he wouldn't kill her before the time of the sacrifice.

And if all that weren't enough, for the last two months she'd had to put up with a stupid voice telling her to be strong.

Seriously?

It was advice she could do without.

Her throat was parched, but she could scent water nearby. She scrambled to her feet, reaching blindly for the bucket only to find it had been placed just out of range. Obviously, Sorien had decided to punish her further, and suddenly her rage rose up inside her like a living thing. She threw her head back and screamed, then hurled the whole weight of her body against the chains, over and over, until at last she sank down, exhausted, her ragged breathing thundering in her ears.

Something moved. A flutter of tiny wings stirred the chill air of the cell, and she went instantly still, listening. A moment later the room was flooded with light.

A man stood in the center of the cell, and her breath caught in her throat. He appeared to have materialized out of nothing, and her first thought was that he must be another vision. But this was no vision; it was a flesh-and-blood man. She could feel the warmth radiating from his body, and she drew the scent of him into her nostrils, the warm muskiness of animal overlying the sweetness of fresh blood.

He was huge, almost as tall as Sorien but with the lithe leanness of a jungle cat. Muscles bulged beneath the black T-shirt he wore over black jeans. He carried a torch, the source of the light, which he tucked into the waistband of his pants, and there was a gun holstered at his shoulder and a knife in a sheath at his thigh. She dragged her gaze upward. His face held a savage, masculine beauty: broad, flat cheekbones, a sharp blade of a nose, and slanted, catlike eyes, the color of the

summer sky she remembered but would never see again. His hair was blond, a hundred shades of sunlight.

He was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen; it was like staring into the sun she could never look upon, and Raven realized, with a sense of awe, that she knew him. She'd seen him in her waking visions. Had once, long ago, dreamed that this man would someday come and set her free. For a brief moment her pain faded, replaced by a sense of wonder.

It didn't last long. She no longer believed anyone would save her.

Yet here he was.

Their gazes locked, and an unexpected expression softened those startling blue eyes. It took her only seconds to identify—goddamn pity. Hepitiedher, and her anger flared again, fierce and hot.

How dare he pity me?

As she searched his face, it came to her who he likely was—or at least who he worked for—and the reason for that pity. It appeared that the Council had caught up with her at last. At the realization, her anger flared brighter. If she had to blame anyone for the fucked-up mess that was her life, then that blame would land squarely on the Council.

It was the Council who had ordered her death when she was a baby. They would have killed her to prevent the prophecy if her father hadn't escaped with her before the order could be carried out. Because of the Council, she had spent the first fourteen years of her life on the run. Because of them, her father had been killed, and she had been captured by the fire-demons.

She'd always wondered if they were aware of her capture. If so, they must have been hunting desperately for her as her twenty-first birthday approached, knowing that she would be sacrificed, and the fire-demons would gain the great victory promised by the prophecy.

Now it looked as though the Council had finally found her and sent someone to carry out the sentence of death they had passed so long ago.

She was only twenty; it wasn't fair that she should die before she had even had a chance to live. Then she shook her head in disgust; only children believed that life was fair, and she was no child.

At least this way she would get her greatest wish; Sorien would never fulfill the prophecy, would never win that final victory. With that knowledge, a warm wave of relief flooded her. A feeling of peace and acceptance suffused her mind. He had come to set her free after all, in the only way still possible. He had come to kill her.

She relaxed then, closed her eyes.

And nothing happened.

Total silence.

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Why didn't he do what he had come to do? It was one thing to accept your death. It was quite another to wait agonizing seconds for the blow to fall. Then she heard a noise, not one she expected, and she opened her eyes.

He was still watching her but had taken a cell phone from his back pocket, was punching in a number, then what looked like a short text.

He slipped the phone back into his pocket. Raven wanted to ask who he had messaged, but when she opened her mouth, her lower lip split, and she winced at the sting of torn flesh. She licked her lip, tasting her own blood. His eyes watched the movement then wandered down over her body. Holding her head up high, she stared him in the face. His lips twitched slightly.

Yeah, she was so funny. The big bad vampire.

"You're a mess," he said.

The words took Raven by surprise, and she scowled. She'd like to see anyone look better after being beaten up by an angry fire-demon.

She swallowed, forcing herself to speak. "Would you pass me the water?"

He frowned but picked up the bucket, putting it down in front of her. She lowered her head and drank deeply. When she glanced up, he was watching her, as she drank like an animal. But wasn't that exactly what she was? What Sorien had reduced her to? She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, clumsy in the chains.

He turned from her and was inspecting her cell. There wasn't a lot to see, just a bare cot and four stone walls. He paced the length of the room, which took all of three seconds, then back, finally facing her again.

“Have you been put here as some form of punishment?” he asked.

She wished. She shook her head. “Nope. This is as good as it gets. This is how I always live. Since I was fourteen and...” She trailed off. She didn't really know who this guy was, what he knew. “Who are you, anyway?” she asked, her eyes narrowing. “How did you get in here?”

He didn't answer; instead he unbuckled the shoulder holster and dropped it and the gun onto the small cot. He clasped the hem of his T-shirt and peeled it from his body.

What the hell?

For a moment, she just stared. Her cheeks flushed. He was...stunning, and the heat sank to her belly, settling low down.

Well, what did she expect? She was repressed, that was all. Hardly unexpected when she'd spent the last seven years in a cell, with absolutely no release for her rampaging teenage hormones.

He was so big. Her eyes were drawn to the vast expanse of honey-gold skin. His arms and shoulders were satin-smooth, his chest lightly furred, his stomach flat and ridged with muscle. She waited, her breath locked in her throat. But he didn't undress further, just crouched down in front of her. He dipped the T-shirt in the bucket of water, squeezed it out then reached toward her.

Er—what the fuck is happening here?

At the first stroke of the cool material against her face, Raven flinched, then held herself immobile. He gently wiped away the blood, and when her face was clean, he rinsed the shirt and started on the rest of her. He hesitated at the point where her tank top skimmed her breasts, revealing the marks—deep, red crescents where Sorien’s claws had broken the skin.

“Did you really have a vision of Sorien’s death?” he asked.

For a second, she didn’t understand the question. Her brain was hardly functioning to its full capacity. Then she remembered her words in the great hall. He must have been watching. She shook her head.

“Pity,” he murmured.

He carried on with his cleaning. Raven closed her eyes. She didn’t know why he didn’t kill her straightaway. Maybe he was a vision after all, but the stroke of the soft material against her bruised skin seemed real. It had been nearly seven years since anyone had touched her with anything approaching tenderness.

She felt a little...strange. And Raven couldn’t understand the need to cry welling up from somewhere deep within her. She swallowed it down. She’d never cried—it was one of the rules of her existence—and she wasn’t going to start now.

He finally went still, and Raven opened her eyes. He was still crouched in front of her, the pity back in his eyes making her steel herself against him.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“Doing what?”

“This—” she nodded at the T-shirt in his hand. “Being...nice? Why don’t you do

what you came to do and get it over with?”

“And what would that be?”

He was playing with her. She rolled her eyes. “Kill me.”

He shook his head. “I’m not here to kill you. I’m here to get you out.”

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The words made no sense to her. Unless the Council had decided to sacrifice her themselves. She studied him, head cocked to one side as though she could somehow see into his mind. She didn't believe him. And anyhow, there was no way out. They were deep underground, surrounded by fire demons. She still had no clue how he had gotten in. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name's Kael Hunter. Your father, Darius, sent me."

Her father? That wasn't possible. This was cruel.

Her father had been her whole world. He'd brought Raven up alone; her mother having abandoned her at birth—she had no clue why. It had just been Raven and her father for as long as she could remember.

Pain flashed through her as an image swept through her mind. His final moments, his body soaked in blood from the many wounds. He'd died trying to protect her from the fire-demons. "My father's dead. I saw him die."

Kael shrugged. "Things are not always as they seem."

Could her father have survived? She had been so sure he was dead, killed in the attack when the fire-demons had taken her. Sorien had told her he was dead. Could he have lied? Of course he could. "You've got a phone. If my father's still alive, then let me talk to him."

"We can't risk using the phone again, in case they pick up the signal. But he's alive, believe me. Next time, I'll bring you proof."

She didn't want to hope. Hope was dangerous and led to despair, but all the same a little flame burst into life, and a first flicker of real interest. "So where has he been? What did he do?" she asked.

"He came to the Council for help."

Now she knew he was lying. She shook her head. "I don't believe you." She didn't try to hide her scorn. "My father would never have gone to the Council. They betrayed him. They were the reason we were on the run. The reason the fire-demons found us."

He shrugged again. "Maybe he knew we were the only ones who could help."

She gritted her teeth at that. "We?" she asked. "Who are you?"

"I told you, my name's Kael. I'm a friend of your father's." He paused briefly. "And the head of the Council."

She stared at him, her hands clenching into fists at her side. This man was responsible for everything that had happened. Her father had told her, warned her to beware the Council and especially its leader.

"So you're the one who demanded my death," she mused. "Yet now you expect me to believe that you've changed your mind and that you actually want to save me?"

"I made a mistake." His tone was harsh.

"What?"

"I was furious with your father, but you were an innocent. It's the Council's place to protect, not to kill. But by the time I cooled down, your father was gone."

She didn't believe him. It was some trick. She shrugged. "So rescue me then."

"Not yet." She gave him a scornful look, and he continued. "It's too great a risk to try and move you in daylight, and besides, we can't escape the castle without help. The place is too well-protected. The Council has an army under our command. As soon as they are in place, they'll attack and provide a distraction. First, I needed to check the layout and ensure you were really here. We had no proof."

She still wasn't sure she believed him. "Why didn't my father come?"

"There are other..." He paused as if unsure of how to go on. Maybe there were other considerations, but if so, he clearly wasn't ready to share them with her yet. Instead, he stretched out a hand and ran it gently over her lower lip. "You should be healing faster than this. When did you last feed?"

Her eyes flickered to his face. So he knew what she was. But of course he did. He knew her father, after all

"Last night." She swallowed down her revulsion at the memory, but he must have seen something in her expression. He looked at her closely, comprehension dawning in his eyes.

"The man in the hall?"

She nodded reluctantly. "Once a month they take me from here to the hall, and I feed." A shudder ran through her, and she had an overwhelming urge to explain herself. "I have no choice. I'm weak and the blood-thirst is too strong. I never drink much, just enough to stop the craving." She took a deep breath. "Once they brought a child. I couldn't, I refused then. They killed her anyway." She closed her eyes briefly at the memory of that death. "I tried to end my life, but they stopped me and ever since I've been kept like this." She raised her arm, rattling the heavy chain. "The next

time they took me, I fed.” She finished. She didn’t want to look at him and see the revulsion that must be in his face.

“Jesus,” he muttered. He closed his eyes, seemingly lost in thought. When he opened them, he appeared to have come to a decision. He reached behind him and drew a blade.

Was he going to kill her after all? “What are you doing?”

“You need more blood; you have to feed.”

He drew the knife across his wrist. Raven watched in fascination, breathing in the rich scent of fresh blood, sweet and heavy. Her own blood quickened in response, thundering through her veins, the pulse throbbing at her throat. She licked her lips and saw him follow the movement. Then he slowly extended his arm toward her.

She ran her tongue across her sharp canines, felt the prickle in her gums as her fangs elongated. This couldn’t be happening. That he should offer his blood to her.

Don’t do it.

She had to keep her wits about her. This was some sort of trick. But she couldn’t resist.

Slowly she lowered her head, holding her breath, expecting his arm to be snatched away at any moment. But he held it steady in front of her. She stroked her tongue along the line of blood and almost swooned. The taste was richer than anything she had ever experienced. Magic coursed through his blood. Whatever he was, he wasn’t human. With that thought, she sank her fangs deep into his vein and she fed. The warm blood heated her cold flesh, filled the emptiness inside her. Strength flowed through her, and she sighed against his skin.

Chapter Three

Kael gazed down at the dark head locked against his arm and experienced the same twist in his guts as when he had first seen her. He hadn't meant to do this; his kind had always found the vampires' kiss too seductive. That first lick of her small, catlike tongue had sent shivers spiraling down his spine. The mouth at his wrist tugged at places deep within his body. Heat coiled low in his belly, and his cock hardened inside his jeans. He shifted, and she glanced up from her concentration and caught him in the gaze of those strange eyes. She continued to feed as she watched him, and she was healing as she fed. The bruises fading from her skin, leaving it white and flawless. His head fell back, and he knew he needed to stop her.

But for a moment longer he allowed himself to enjoy the sensations coursing through his body. Allowed himself to think, at last, of what he had come here to do. His body hardened further at the thought, and he closed his eyes and savored the feeling.

Would she cooperate? It had to be done, and he would prefer it to be by her consent. Rape was inconceivable to him, and, if he were truthful, he didn't want to add further to her suffering. But he had thought it through carefully, considered every option. This was the only way he could be sure that once she was out of here the Council would not call for her sacrifice.

Now he realized something he hadn't expected. He wanted her quite desperately, and the notion seemed somehow wrong, as though he should have no thought of taking pleasure from such an act.

He was no celibate. He took human women when the need was on him, but he never

formed relationships, never allowed himself to get close. He suspected, where Raven was concerned, it was already too late. He stared down at her, studying her.

What made her different?

She was beautiful, strange and exotic, but there was more. She stirred something inside him that he'd believed had died long ago with his people.

He swayed, lightheaded from the lack of blood. Just as he thought he would have to pull her off, she released him. She stroked her velvet tongue once over the already-healing cut, then she sighed. Her head fell back, and he could see the rapid rise and fall of her breasts beneath the thin cotton as she dragged the air into her lungs. She no longer appeared gaunt, and her pale skin shone. The claw marks were gone from her breast and the nipples stood out hard and swollen. When he breathed in, the scent of her arousal filled his nostrils, seeping into his mind, and his body responded to that scent, so he had to force himself to stand up and back away.

Holy shit.

She was going to explode with the power coursing through her blood. It throbbed in her veins as though she had the force to overcome anything. The meager amounts of human blood she had taken in the past had never tasted this good, had never made her feel like this. What was he?

She felt heavy, languorous, her nipples tight, her sex soft and swollen, her skin so sensitive that the minutest movements of the chill air sent frissons of sensation rippling through her.

She glanced up. Kael was leaning against the wall, arms folded across his body. He

was watching her closely. There was a sleepy, almost sated expression on his face as though it was he who had fed, not her. His eyes moved leisurely over her body and she glanced down. The scars and bruising had vanished, leaving her skin clear, smooth.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Her eyes flew back to his face and she nodded. “Your blood tastes different, feels different.”

He smiled. “I am different. You’ve only ever drunk human blood.” He looked at her sharply. “Unless you fed from the fire-demons?”

Raven shuddered in revulsion. “At first, they tried to make me. But I threw up all over them and they stopped trying.” The last years would have been far easier if she had been able to feed from them. It would have saved her so much heartache and guilt. “That was when they started to bring the humans.”

Everything seemed different, and she realized it was the absence of pain and hunger. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself a few moments to savor the feeling. When she opened them again, he was still watching her.

“Thank you,” she said.

“It was my pleasure.”

She stared at him, wanting to ask a question but scared of the answer. He appeared so big, so strong-looking, that she found it hard to believe that she could cause him pain, but she needed to know. “Did I hurt you?”

He smiled then. “It felt good.”

“Good?”

“My people have always avoided the kiss of the vampire. We find it addictive. Now I know why.”

She studied him, trying to see what he was. But he looked human. “Your people? What are you? Your blood tastes of magic.”

Kael shrugged. “My people are gone. I am all that’s left. I am a shape-shifter.”

“Like a werewolf?”

He shook his head. “Not really. Werewolves start out as human, they’re infected by the bite of another wolf. We are one of the immortal races and are born into our powers.”

“But you can change?”

“Into any living organism.”

“Before you came, I heard the sound of wings.”

“I entered the cell as a moth.”

Raven stared at him, trying to imagine something so huge turning into something so small. It seemed impossible, and she smiled. The smile felt strange, like some long-forgotten skill. She raised her hand and pushed her hair behind her ear. The chains clanked, and she remembered she was still a prisoner. She didn't really know this man, what he wanted from her. He said he was here to release her, but she was still in chains. She looked at him.

“Can you release me?”

“Yes.”

Then something flickered behind his eyes, and desolation swamped her. She had lived through enough of Sorien's games to learn that hope invariably led to despair. Whatever this man spoke of freeing her, aiding her, there would be a price to pay, and suddenly anger rose up inside her. It felt good.

“And will you release me?” she asked.

“Not just yet.”

Chapter Four

“Why?” Raven whispered.

He didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he pushed himself from the wall and paced the confines of the cell like a caged animal. Finally, he came to a halt in front of her, hands jammed in the pockets of his jeans, and answered her question with one of his own. “What do you know of the prophecy, Raven?”

“Everything.” He raised an eyebrow, and she shrugged. “My father told me that my mother’s sister brought me to the Council when I was a baby. She told them that a prophecy had been made at the time of my birth. A prophecy foretelling the future. They said that if either the Council, or the fire-demons, were to sacrifice me on my twenty-first birthday, then that side would win a great victory over their enemies.”

“Do you know the actual words?”

“Yes, my father taught me.” She closed her eyes and began to recite. ““That whosoever shall sacrifice the virgin...”” She paused. Opened her eyes and stared at him. “Oh.”

She’d never really thought about the significance of that word before, except to be thankful that she would at least be saved the horror of rape at Sorien’s hands. Now it suddenly occurred to her where Kael was going with this.

He took a step closer. “Raven, you don’t have to die. There is another way.”

She was scrambling to get her head around the implications.

Why had she never thought about this before?

Because there was no point. There was hardly a whole load of willing and eager men at her disposal. None, actually.

He stroked one finger down her cheek, and her skin tingled where he touched. She swallowed, forcing herself not to flinch. “What way is that?” she asked. She was pretty sure she knew the answer but wanted to be absolutely sure before she made a complete fool of herself.

A faint flicker of amusement flashed across his features, but he answered the question. “Once you have lain with a man, the prophecy cannot come to pass.”

Lain? That was an...old-fashioned way to put it.

“Once I’ve fucked a man, you mean?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

Well, there it was. She really couldn’t think of a single thing to say. She wanted to object. Or did she? She forced her eyes to linger on the long length of him and felt a queer twist in her insides. She couldn’t deny that he held a strange, unexpected attraction for her, something she had never expected to feel.

She remembered her first vision of Kael. Apparently, her mother had the sight, and her father had warned her that it might pass to her, and she’d known she was seeing her future. She’d been fourteen at the time and only hours from being taken by the fire-demons. Less than a year later, the blood-thirst had come upon her and she had been locked in the darkness. After that, Kael had come to her often in dreams and

visions, reminding her of the sun and the summer skies she would never see again.

She'd been drawn to him from the first, but as she had grown, matured, those feelings had changed until she'd come to want him as a woman.

Yeah, it was official; she was repressed, but she'd needed something to keep her going in the darkness.

Now, she could still feel the pull of erotic heat from the feeding. But she also couldn't forget that he was from the Council. She had no reason to trust anyone from the Council. And every reason not to.

"You have to understand," Kael said when she remained silent. "There are still those among us who believe we are fools not to take advantage of the prophecy, not to make the sacrifice ourselves. This is the only way to guarantee your safety once you're out of here. If you want to live, you cannot leave this castle a virgin."

A shiver ran through her at his words. That so many wanted her dead.

Maybe she should let them have her—offer herself up as a virgin sacrifice. That way, the Council would gain the great victory prophesied at her birth, and she would at least do a little bit of good in the world. How many people got that option?

And the Council were supposed to be the good guys, after all. Out of the two—the Council and the fire-demons—she hated the former just a little bit less. She wanted Sorien defeated so badly it was like a pain at the very core of her being. But she also wanted to see him die. She wouldn't be around to do that if she was sacrificed.

So it looked like Kael was right. She knew it, but while she was ready to acknowledge that she felt the pull of desire, she wasn't sure she was ready to allow anybody that intimacy. When she closed her eyes, she could see again the fates of the

humans brought here so she could feed. Raped, tortured, and abused by Sorien and his men, their bodies torn apart for their pleasure. Kael must have seen the revulsion reflected in her face, because his voice was harsh when he spoke again.

“Would you rather the prophecy came to pass, that Sorien gains supremacy over the human race for a thousand years?”

The words broke into her thoughts. She stared up at him, not attempting to hide her disdain. What did he know? A warrior? He had probably never faced defeat, despair. This was just one more thing over which she had no control. And he was so arrogant; he no doubt presumed that she would jump at the opportunity to lie with him. Asshole.

No, she did not want Sorien to win. But if she was dead, then that wasn't going to happen. But would she really prefer to die than to have sex with Kael?

She forced herself to really think about escaping from this place, being reunited with her father, and a tremor of apprehension ran through her. She'd sunk too far to ever belong in the world of light. She'd been weak, given in to the hunger.

What would her father think of the monster she had become?

He'd always told, drilled into her, that a vampire doesn't have to kill, and that she should never feed on the blood of the unwilling. How could she face him with the blood of so many innocents on her hands? Have him look at her with revulsion? She smoothed her features into blankness.

"I'd rather you killed me."

Pain wrenched through him at her words. She would prefer death to lying with him.

He stared at her and slowly took in the tenseness of her muscles. Strain showed in every line of her body as she held herself rigid. Her posture reminded him of how she had stood before Sorien, how she had taunted him, tempted him to kill her. What had life shown her that she should choose to live? What could she know of love?

The thought brought him up short. Love? His people had always found love within their own kind, and when they had been wiped out by the fire-demons he had put aside all thoughts of ever finding a true mate. Now he looked at Raven and experienced again that curious stirring in his heart. She was meant to be his.

But he owed her. If he'd offered her the protection of the Council all those years ago, rather than a sentence of death, then she might never have been taken by the fire-demons. And, if the life she had led now made her crave the peace of death, could he deny her that? His mind went back to his sister. She had spent a year imprisoned by

the fire-demons, and she had begged for death. Could he do less for Raven?

“Do you really want to die?” He had to force the words out.

“I’ve longed for death many times.”

“I won’t kill you.”

She sneered. “Will you rape me instead, then?”

He turned from her, his fists clenched. He had no clue what to do. He’d seen her fear, her pain. But he couldn’t just kill her, couldn’t just put her out of her misery like a damaged dog. His whole being fought against it. Besides, he’d also seen glimpses of what she could be.

He forced himself to concentrate; there was something else here. Raven was a fighter, he’d seen that. She wasn’t afraid of pain. So why was she so willing to die? He took a deep breath and turned back to her.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said. “Allow me to do what I must. Don’t fight me and afterwards, if you still wish to die, I will see to it that you get your desire.”

She hesitated, and his hands fisted at his side.

“Raven, I promise you, however distasteful you find sharing your body with me, it will cause you no pain.” He took a deep, calming breath. He knew there was something between them, some bond. Instinct told him that what they would have together would be special, magical. He needed the chance to show Raven that, to prove to her that life was worth living. “I have to go,” he said. “But I will return tomorrow before sunset. Think about what I’ve said. The choice will be yours. To live or to die. I don’t think you’re a coward, Raven. But if you wish to prove me

wrong, then it's your right,"

She stared at him her eyes narrowing. "You're leaving?"

"I have things to arrange. But I'll be back."

He could see the doubt in her eyes. The lack of trust, but why should she trust him? Maybe with a little time, she would come to see this was the only way.

He stepped closer, and her muscles tensed with the need to run. He ignored the guilt that twisted his insides into knots and lowered his head and slowly kissed her. She tasted sweet. He'd never kissed a vampire before. For a moment, her lips softened, then tension ran through her and she stiffened and stepped away.

He didn't try to hold her. Instead, he glanced around the cell, picked up his T-shirt, and willed the change over himself.

He was gone.

Just vanished.

A faint glow of light remained, and a tiny blue moth hovered in the center of the room. She watched as it fluttered its wings and then disappeared through the bars in the cell door. She ran across the room, was brought up short by the chains, and stood, staring at the last glimmer of light. Then that too was gone, and she was left in darkness.

Would she ever see him again?

Chapter Five

By the time Kael made it back to the Council's headquarters in London, there was still an hour until dawn. He drove down into the underground carpark and sat for a moment.

Darius would still be awake, no doubt impatiently waiting for him. Kael wanted to talk to Raven's father face to face before he met with the rest of the Council. There were important things to decide.

As he approached his office, a tall figure appeared from one of the rooms close by. Lukas. The second-in-command at the Council—the position that had once belonged to Darius.

“Did you find her?”

When they had first received news of Raven's whereabouts, Lukas had put forward a proposal that they should free her from the fire-demons and then sacrifice her themselves. Gain the victory; defeat the fire-demons once and for all. Kael wouldn't countenance that course of action—murdering an innocent woman would make them as bad as their enemies. He'd taken a step down that route when Raven's aunt, the witch, had first brought her to them. And he'd regretted it immediately.

Lukas had appeared to go along with the decision to free her and return her to her father, but Kael didn't trust him totally. Lukas was fae. He hated the fire-demons, but he was also ambitious. He believed the Council should take a more dominant role in world politics. Kael had an idea that Lukas was splitting the Council's loyalties,

speaking in secret, gaining allies.

For a moment, he considered lying—saying that he hadn't found her. But he was going to need the help of the Council to make an attack on the fire-demons' fortress, to provide a distraction that would allow them to free Raven.

"I've found her. We'll meet after I've spoken to Darius."

"Maybe you should keep it from the vampire for the moment."

"He already knows." That was why he had risked the text message from Raven's cell. He wanted Darius to know. Kael had an idea Lukas might suggest they keep the knowledge of Raven from him. This way that wasn't an option.

Lukas' nostrils flared, a sure sign the fae was not happy. Hard luck. "That was perhaps a little precipitous."

"Perhaps," Kael replied. "But he has a right to know."

Lukas didn't get the chance to answer, because at that moment Kael's office door opened and Darius stood there. His black hair was pulled into a ponytail, clearly showing the scar that ran down his right cheek. A souvenir of Sorien's blade, the night they had taken Raven.

The vampire's glance flicked between the Kael and Lukas, eyes narrowing. "I thought I heard voices."

Lukas nodded briefly, then turned to Kael. "I'll gather the Council."

"Thanks. I'll see you in an hour."

The other man whirled around and strode away.

“Asshole,” Darius muttered.

“Maybe. But we need his help.”

He gestured to his office, then followed Darius inside, shutting the door behind him.

“So you found her?” Darius asked, turning to face him.

Kael nodded, and Darius collapsed back into the chair behind him as though the strength was drained from his limbs. For a minute he sat, his head in his hands, then he slowly straightened. “Tell me.”

“She was where we were told.”

Since Raven had been taken, Darius had searched the world for any sign or word of her whereabouts. Periodically, he would return to the Council to discover if they had any new information. And that was a measure of his desperation—he had once sworn he would have nothing to do with the Council for the rest of eternity.

Then three days ago, Kael had received an anonymous message. The location of the fire-demons’ fortress. And that Raven was imprisoned there. He’d contacted Darius and the vampire had come immediately.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Council had also learned of the message. And Lukas had put forward his proposal to sacrifice Raven themselves.

“How is she?” Darius asked, a tremor in his voice.

“She’s...alive. And basically unharmed.” If you ignored the mental and emotional

damage she had clearly suffered. She wanted death rather than freedom. On the journey back, he'd gone over and over what her reasons could be.

Had he expected her to jump at the chance of having sex with him?

If he was honest—yes?

It had seemed such a simple way out of the problem of the Council demanding her death and the fulfillment of the prophecy in their favor. Once she was no longer a virgin, then there would be no point in sacrificing her. And the sooner the better. He didn't trust Lukas.

But he clearly hadn't taken into account what Raven had been though in the last few years. And he suspected that she had some major guilt in her mind. Had blamed herself for some of the things she had been forced to do.

He'd seen a flash of shame in her face.

Likely, it wasn't so much having sex with him she was against—or was that just wishful thinking on his part?—but, rather, she didn't feel she deserved to be free and maybe she was afraid and ashamed to face the world outside, especially her father.

How could he convince her that she had nothing to be ashamed of?

“What aren't you telling me?” Darius knew him so well. They'd once been friends. Before that friendship had been torn apart. Kael blamed the witches. As he blamed them for so much else. Though if he was totally honest, so much could have been avoided if only he'd kept his temper that day, had behaved differently. Or if Darius hadn't stolen the witch in the first place and then gotten her with child. There was blame enough to spread around.

He took a deep breath, trying to decide what to tell the vampire. How much to reveal.

There were some things a man should not hear about his daughter. Like his ex-best friend had offered to relieve her of her virginity. But it must have occurred to Darius, even if he had never spoken the words out loud.

“She’s...damaged. She been there for seven years; it would be surprising if it hadn’t affected her. They brought her humans. Forced her to drink. Then killed them in front of her.”

“Jesus.”

“She blames herself for their deaths.”

“I once told her that she should never take the blood of innocents,” Darius murmured. He turned away, pressed his fingers to his scalp.

“She had no choice,” Kael said.

Darius swung around, fury on his face. He snarled, revealing the tip of one sharp white fang, and his eyes bled to crimson. “You think I don’t fucking know that?”

“Control yourself.” Kael could hold his own against the vampire, but it would hardly help things if they came to blows.

Darius breathed slowly, and the rage left his face. “Can we get her out?”

“Yes. If we go in after darkness. We’ll stage an attack as soon as night falls. In the chaos, I’ll free her. Just be ready to get her away. I don’t trust some of the Council.”

“Thank you.”

“We all hold some of the blame for this. I just hope she agrees to come with me. She

has no love of the Council.”

Darius moved toward him, rested a hand on his shoulder. “Just do what you have to. Get my daughter out, and we’ll worry about the rest afterward. Death is the only real finality. As long as she’s alive, somehow I’ll make things right.”

Chapter Six

Raven had spent the night and the following day going over the meeting. Maybe it had all been a figment of her imagination.

Did she want that to be true? Did she want Kael Hunter with his offer of freedom to be nothing more than something conjured up from a damaged mind?

And could her father really be alive? All these years believing he was dead. Would her life have been different if she'd known he lived? Would the hope have remained with her longer? Helped her through the long years.

But convinced of his death, she had given up hope a long time ago. Now it scratched at her insides, clawed at her mind. Told her maybe she didn't have to die. That there could be a future for her.

All she had to do was believe in Kael Hunter.

And let him have sex with her.

Then somehow find a way to live with the guilt and the shame. She couldn't do it.

Be strong, Raven.

There was that voice again. Another figment of her deranged mind?

Probably.

She got to her feet and paced the few steps her chain would allow her. Then back. Over and over, trying to fight the frustration, until she sank to her knees again.

Would he return? The time dragged even more than usual, the darkness a solid thing. She just wanted it over with now. An end to her existence.

Didn't she?

She had no idea how long it had been before she sensed a faint movement in the room, and then the light appeared. And there he was.

For long moments she just stared. He was dressed the same as his last visit, though unlike hers, his clothes appeared clean. Had he been back to the Council? Had he seen her father? Her mind filled with questions, but she bit her lip to keep them inside until she tasted the sharp, metallic tang of her own blood.

"Are you here to finish this?" she asked. One way or another.

"No. We're still waiting for word from the Council that the attacking force is in place. I just wanted to see you again, so you'd know what's happening." He took a step closer and held something out to her. "And I brought you a present. From your father." A small, black box tied with a red ribbon.

"Oh." Reaching out a hand, she took the box, her fingers fumbling as she pulled at the ribbon. She sat back on her heels, then slowly raised the lid. Inside was a silver locket on a black velvet ribbon. Her eyes pricked as she stared at it for long moments, then picked it up, turned it in her hands. It was circular and engraved with an intricate design. She ran her fingers over the surface, then found the latch at the side, pressed, and it sprang open. Inside was the picture of a woman. A stranger.

"Your mother," Kael said.

“I didn’t know he had a picture. He never showed it to me before...”

“He didn’t. He asked your aunt.”

“My aunt?” Her father had rarely spoken of her mother’s sisters. She knew there had been bad feelings between them.

“He also says to please come back to him. Whatever you’ve done—it’s not your fault, and there is nothing to forgive.”

The words made her chest ache. She wanted to believe them. She just wasn’t sure they were true.

She studied the picture; the woman was beautiful, with blond hair, a pointed chin, and high cheekbones. There was nothing of Raven in there. Except for the eyes, silver and rimmed with black.

“You have her eyes,” Kael murmured.

“Witch’s eyes? That’s what my father always said.” She smiled. “It never sounded like a compliment.”

“No, your father has no reason to love the witches, but he wanted you to have a picture. To show you what she was like.”

“Thank you.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:46 pm

They were silent for a few minutes. Raven gave the locket a last look and then shoved it in her jeans pocket. She wouldn't risk wearing it and catching the attention of Sorien's men. She handed the box back to Kael.

"So have you changed your mind?" he asked.

She knew straightaway to what he was referring. Probably because it was at the forefront of her mind. "About having sex with you?"

He winced a little at her words. She shook her head.

"Why not?" he asked. He took a step closer. "You've known only darkness and pain for so long; let me show you a little of the pleasures of life, and afterwards, if you still want to die, then the decision is yours."

Raven looked at him, tried to imagine what it would be like, his hands on her body, more than just his hands. A queer, unexpected jolt of heat sparked at her core. Could she do it knowing that at the end he would grant her the peace she craved?

For so many years, this man had given her whatever little hope and happiness she had known. Only the moments when she'd been lost in her visions of him had she been able to forget, if only briefly, the horrors of her existence.

Now she was scared. What if he touched her and it was a huge disappointment? But maybe worse, what if he made love to her and he was everything she had dreamed of? And that would make it so much harder to stay true to her decision.

When she remained silent, his lips formed a grim line. He drew the knife from the sheath at his thigh. It was a wicked-looking blade, and a flicker of unease churned in her stomach. Was she afraid after all? One thing she did know; she didn't want to die on her knees. She struggled to her feet, clumsy in the chains. He didn't help, just watched through narrowed eyes, then took another step closer.

She realized she'd expected a bit more of an argument from him. That he'd try and convince her. He'd seemed like he cared a little whether she lived or died.

But maybe not.

She backed away, but she had nowhere to go; already the rough stone of the cell wall burned cold against her back. She watched, mesmerized as he touched the point of the dagger to her stomach. Through the thin cotton of her tank top, the metal was cold, and she glanced down. It pressed lightly against her. One quick thrust and the blade would pierce her skin.

But he knew what she was; that he couldn't kill her like this. Did he mean to torture her first? She closed her eyes. But instead of the expected sharp stab of pain, the tip of the knife glided over her. It slid up over the flat plain of her stomach, leaving a trail of fire, over the swell of her breast, pausing briefly to tease the sensitive peak. Heat flared again in her belly, and she shivered at the sensation. She raised her head as the knife continued upward, coming to rest at the base of her throat. The point pierced her skin, and her eyes flew open.

"Do you really want death so much?" he asked softly.

She stared into his eyes. They were deep-blue, cold, showing no emotion. "I don't fear death," she said.

His face twisted into an expression of scorn. "No, it's life you fear."

She gritted her teeth at his words. Then she pressed against the point of the blade, winced at the sharp sting as it sank deeper. He pulled back.

Hah, he hadn't expected that.

"What I fear is being the instrument of my enemy's ultimate victory." But even as she spoke, she wondered at his words. She had accepted death, could she now accept a chance at life? Could she somehow learn to live with what she had become?

"Well, then," he said, "yield to me, and the prophecy will never come to pass." He paused. "Come on, Raven," he coaxed, "wouldn't you like to live to see Sorien meet that messy end?"

"I told you, I made that up."

He smiled then, a cold, cruel smile. "I could make it happen for you."

She considered him for a moment. "Why do you care?"

"I let you down once before when I demanded your death. I won't do it a second time. Besides . . ." he paused.

"Besides?"

He didn't answer straightaway. Instead, his gaze wandered down over her body. His eyes, when they returned to her face, were sleepy, heavy-lidded. A slight smile curled the corner of his mouth.

"Besides," he murmured, and his voice had lowered, soft, like velvet caressing her sensitive ears. "I want you."

Raven stared at him. It was the last thing she had expected to hear, and she was speechless.

His smile faded. "I didn't expect to," he continued, almost speaking to himself. "Nor desired to. But since you latched those pretty fangs into my flesh and sucked my blood, I've been as hard as a rock. You expect me to kill you, and all I can think about is sinking myself into your body."

Warmth kindled inside her at his words, a throbbing heat between her thighs, and she stared at him, almost mesmerized. She licked her lips, and he smiled again. "So what do you say, Raven? Let me take the body you so obviously have no more use for, and afterward, if you still desire it, I'll take your life."

Kael searched her face and knew in an instant that her resolve was weakening. She had a slightly panicked look in her eyes; they darted from his face, down his body, no doubt searching for the truth of his words. Her eyes widened at the obvious evidence that he wanted her, and then flew back to his face. He forced his breathing to slow as he watched her. She was still chained to the wall, and he knew he should release her, but first he need to touch her, taste her.

He opened his fingers and the knife clattered to the floor. Taking a step closer, he reached out to smooth the spot where his blade had pierced her throat. He traced the line of a vein as it pulsed beneath the fragile skin, and he could feel the rapid throb of her blood beneath his fingers. He stroked his fingers over her collar bone, and her skin was like satin. His hand moved lower to gently cup her breast, and he scraped the pad of his thumb over the taut nipple. A tremor ran through her. He paused.

She was a virgin, and he had one chance to show her that she didn't want to die. Panic held him immobile. But then he was overcome by a feeling of rightness. This was meant to be. Leaning forward, he softly kissed the corner of her mouth, then brushed her lips with his. She stayed motionless while he deepened the kiss, stroking her lips with his tongue until she opened her mouth slightly and he slipped inside. She tasted sweet and hot, and his hands slid up to cup her face, his lips slanting over hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. He finally felt her move against him then. Felt the tentative stirring of her tongue against his, heard the clink of the chains as her arms came up to grip his, and he was filled with a fierce exultation. She would be his.

Then she went still. He forced himself to pull back and look down into her face. Her

silver eyes were unfocused, as though she was seeing something inside her head. A shiver of awe rippled through him.

“Someone’s coming,” she said, her voice strangely blank. “One of Sorien’s men.”

He frowned. “I thought you said you didn’t have the sight.”

She blinked as if awakening from a trance. “No,” she replied. “I said I hadn’t seen Sorien’s death. You have to go.”

The aftermath of a vision always left her slightly dazed, and Raven frowned. Then it came to her—obviously he couldn’t leave her; he hadn’t yet done what he had come for, and he couldn’t allow the prophecy to be fulfilled. Now they had run out of time and he would have to kill her after all. She felt a brief stab of regret and wondered at it. She’d thought herself so willing to die, had welcomed the thought of peace at last, and now she wavered. What had changed?

She could still feel the sensation of his lips on hers. At the first touch, her body had stirred to life and, for a brief moment, she had wondered if he truly cared. But nothing had changed. He hadn’t come to save her; he had come to save the rest of the world. She bowed her head, praying for the strength to see this through, to be strong.

“If they come now, then Sorien will win. Don’t you understand? I’ve accepted my death. It was the thought of Sorien gaining from it that was truly killing me.” She slammed her hand into the rock wall behind her. “You must prevent the prophecy from being fulfilled.”

He stared at her through narrowed eyes. “Forget it!” he snarled. “I came here to save you, and I am not killing you now.” He took a deep breath. “We can’t go now. I’ll

never get you out without the distraction. And the Council is taking its time. So tonight I'll leave you, but the next time I come, we leave together."

And the lights went out, and he was gone.

Chapter Seven

Something must have warned them. Or maybe Sorien was getting twitchy as her birthday approached.

Since Kael's last visit, three days ago, they'd been checking on her every few hours. They just peered in through the door, not coming close. Most of them were afraid of her. But at least they brought her water. She had enough to drink and bathe. Not all of the fire-demons were as bad as their leader.

But perhaps, somehow, Kael was aware of the increased security. Maybe that was why he hadn't come back. He knew her escape was impossible. But it was unlikely he would just leave her here and allow the fire-demons to fulfill the prophecy.

Which meant...something had happened to him.

She rubbed the spot between her eyes. Why couldn't the stupid visions come when they were of some use?

Three days, and they'd been the longest of her life.

Her emotions constantly shifted between hope and despair and back again. She still hadn't decided whether she would allow him to make love to her. Or even if she would go with him. Or the alternative.

Hours were spent trying to imagine Kael killing her. Actually, it was easier than imagining him making love. Or having sex. Love didn't come into it. He would make

it a quick death. It wouldn't hurt.

Closing her eyes, she remembered the sensation of the knife at her throat. Just one sharp lunge and she'd be gone—well, as long as he followed through and chopped off her head—and the nightmare would be over.

Death or sex.

Ugh.

Except he wasn't here. So it was pointless to keep thinking about her options. As usual, she didn't have any.

And if he did come, then whatever happened would have to happen before one of Sorien's men came to check on her. She didn't want Kael to die because of her. Even if he was head of the horrible Council.

She was sitting on the ground, chewing on her fingernails, when she heard him arrive. The now-familiar flutter of tiny wings. Then the light flashed on, and there he was. Her heart rate picked up, a mix of fear and...she wasn't sure. Or maybe she just wasn't ready to admit it yet.

By her reckoning, there were still hours of daylight. And her guard was expected at any moment. She struggled to her feet, trying to reconcile the fear and the hope churning inside her. Her palms were clammy, her heart now racing.

As he stepped toward her, the breath caught in her throat. He lowered his head and she couldn't move, was locked in place by some invisible force as his lips touched hers briefly, sending warmth radiating through her.

He raised his head. "How have you been?"

She blew out her breath. “How do you think I’ve been? I’ve been stuck in this crappy cell for three days. I’ve been...crappy.” The shadow of a smile crossed his face and her hands fisted at her side. “You have to go. They’ve been checking on me every few hours, and they’ll find you here.”

He shook his head. “I won’t leave you again. We go tonight. As soon as it’s dark.”

Raven searched his face and could see the resolve in his expression. But how could they wait until darkness? Her guard would be here any moment. If he found Kael here, he would raise the alarm and they would never get out, and any chance of freedom or preventing the prophecy would be snatched from her. Kael had to kill her. The prophecy could not come to pass. Panic tore at her mind.

The faint clang of a metal door opening warned her of the approaching guard.

“He’s almost here,” she whispered. “You must do it now.”

“Relax,” Kael murmured.

His expression was impassive, calm, and Raven had to bite back the scream that threatened to erupt. He looked around the cell, and then he vanished.

Raven blinked. She stared at the spot where he had stood and caught a flicker of movement. A small jeweled gecko darted across the floor. It clawed up the wall beside the cell door and went still, blending into the rough stone. The light went out and Raven sank to her knees, praying they would do no more than peer in the door.

The key scraped in the lock, and a moment later the door was flung open.

Crap.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she allowed her body to sag against her restraints, shaking her head so her long hair spilled over to curtain her face.

The cell was filled with light, and Raven closed her eyes. She remained motionless as the heavy footsteps crossed the short space. The stench of sulfur and smoke that always accompanied the fire-demons seared her nostrils, and fear blossomed inside her—a nest of cockroaches writhing in her belly. She swallowed the nausea of hatred that rose in her throat as the fire-demon came to a halt in front of her. He leaned down and grasped her hair in a claw-like hand. Her head was jerked upright, and she opened her eyes and stared into his face. His breath was hot against her skin, and she tried to hold her own breath against the stink.

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It was Griefen, Sorien's second-in-command. "There was a light." He glanced around the cell, then back to her, eyes narrowing in confusion. His eyes searched her face then down over her body.

"You look well, witch. What evil have you been brewing in here?"

When she remained mute, he straightened and took a step back, raising his hand. Raven watched him warily, bracing herself for the blow, then couldn't resist a quick peek at the wall where the lizard had been. It was gone. She looked back at the fire-demon. His gaze flicked about the room as though he could sense something amiss.

A soft, sibilant hiss came from beneath the cot. Griefen turned to stare.

The serpent emerged gradually from the shadows, its coffin-shaped head mere inches from the ground as it glided slowly across the floor of the cell. Raven found she couldn't look away, her gaze riveted to the sinuous, gray-brown body. It was thicker than a man's arm and over ten feet in length. The demon appeared petrified, locked in place, staring in horror as the snake slithered to a halt a yard away from him. Slowly, it raised its head, flat hood spreading, jaws opening to reveal the inky blackness of its mouth and flashing, razor-sharp fangs. Raven watched transfixed as its head slowly undulated from side to side.

Then it struck.

She hardly caught the movement, it was so fast. Once, twice, then again, it sank its fangs deep into the face and throat of the fire-demon. Griefen moved then, his hands rising to try to ward off the attack, scrabbling at the serpent. He had no chance,

crashing to his knees under the force of the blows. A fierce wave of exultation washed over her as a whimper trickled from his swelling lips.

She turned from him to stare at the serpent. It watched her, yellow eyes unblinking. Then Kael was back. He stood before her, his expression blank as he stared at the demon. Grieffen was still on his knees and Kael kicked out, hitting him in the chest, and the demon fell backward to the floor.

Kael nudged the writhing fire-demon with his toe. “Isn’t it good to know you’re not the only thing with fangs?”

“What was that?” Raven asked.

“Black mamba,” he replied. “Deadliest snake on the planet. It normally takes around twenty minutes for the poison to kill. Fortunately, fire-demons run a bit hotter than your average human—he’ll be dead in five.”

“Pity.”

Kael turned to her and smiled. “You don’t think we should put him out of his misery then?”

“No.”

Grieffen was convulsing now, his back arched from the floor, white foam frothing at his mouth, his nostrils. Raven watched curiously. She felt no compassion, only regret that he wouldn’t suffer longer. Within a few minutes he was still, his face a mask of agony as the life faded from his bulging eyes. Kael knelt beside the body, knife in hand, grabbed the head by the hair, and severed the neck. The body collapsed in upon itself, a pall of ochre smoke rising from the corpse, and in a few moments, nothing remained but a pile of ashes.

Raven glanced up at Kael. He appeared lost in thought. Was he considering his options? Deciding whether it was safer to kill her after all? He had said he wanted her, and she believed him, but was that enough to risk their capture?

She was about to find out.

Chapter Eight

Kael rose to his feet and kicked at the ash with the toe of his boot. He hadn't planned on any direct confrontation. His aim had been to lie low until the attack began and then get Raven out in the confusion. But the fire-demon hadn't left him any choice. Clearly suspicious, he no doubt would have raised the security level and they would have never gotten out of the place unnoticed.

There was also the fact that he'd raised his hand to Raven—never going to happen. Not again.

"They'll come looking for him," Raven said.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Who was he? Do you know?"

Raven nodded. "It was Grieffen, Sorien's second-in-command, and he'll be missed."

She was right. "We need to get out of here."

He considered making love to her quickly, now, ensuring once and for all that the prophecy could not come to pass. But his whole being rebelled against taking her here with the stench of dead fire-demon in their nostrils.

The problem was: where to take Raven to keep her safe until the attack? "Stay here," he said.

Raven rattled her chains. "Like I've got an option," she muttered.

Kael grinned, his grin widening as she scowled in return.

Raven watched as he left the cell then closed her eyes and waited. She had to force herself to relax, impatient to get away.

She was trying to keep down the feelings of hope that had been growing since Kael had first appeared days ago. She'd tried to fight it, scared that she was doomed to disappointment.

But it had been almost impossible. The news that her father was alive and had been searching for her had lightened her spirit. Whatever happened here today, she would always have that. She'd felt so forsaken, as though she were unloved in a world full of darkness, a mere pawn in a war which had gone on for so long no one remembered the beginning. Now the knowledge that someone had been searching for her through all the long years was like a thrill in her blood.

She also realized how weak she had been. The blood she had taken in the past had never been enough; it had merely reduced the craving. But hunger had been a constant companion. Feeding up until then had always been accompanied by guilt, but now she relived the moment when she had sunk her fangs into Kael's arm. Felt again the resilience of his firm flesh beneath her teeth, licked her lips as she remembered the rich taste of his blood. It had been days ago and yet she could feel her body responding to the memory, heat coiling at her core, her breasts swelling. That brought back other feelings, the sensation of his huge hand cupping her breast, the taste of his tongue as he kissed her. And she realized she no longer feared his taking of her body. Rather, she feared that somehow it would not happen, and Kael would be forced to kill her so as not to let her fall innocent into the hands of their enemies.

Where the hell was he? She shifted restlessly, then got to her feet, tugging at the chains. Pointlessly, because she knew there was no escaping. She had tried often enough. Finally, when she thought she would explode from impatience, he reappeared, framed in the doorway.

“Where the hell have you been?”

He looked faintly startled at her vehemence. Then he smiled. “Missed me?”

She stared at him through narrowed eyes, and he gave a casual shrug. He carried a bundle that he threw onto the cot. Then he stalked toward her, the knife clasped in his hand. “Hold out your hands.”

She held out her wrists with their shackles. Placing the knife point to the lock of the first, he twisted, and the shackle fell open. He did the same to the second, and Raven finally stood free.

A wave of euphoria almost engulfed her. She swayed slightly, and he rested a hand on her arm to steady her. Staring into the blueness of his eyes, she reached out her own hand, running trembling fingers through the silky sunlight strands of his hair.

For the first time in years she stood free. Was it possible? Could this man save her after all? Raven didn’t know, but what she was certain of was that he would try.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

She made to step back, but his grip tightened on her shoulders and he dragged her against the hard length of his body. He slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She tasted him, sensing the desperation in his touch. Then he put her firmly from him.

“My pleasure,” he murmured. “Now let’s get out of here.”

He picked up the bundle he had thrown on the cot and handed it to her. “Wrap yourself in this.”

Raven shook it out. It was a gray blanket. She lifted it to her face and sniffed.

“Don’t go all fussy on me,” he said. “That was all I could find. You need to cover yourself completely. We’ll be going into daylight.”

A tremor rippled through her. She knew what the light of the sun would do to her; Sorien had described it in infinite detail, relishing her fear. She glanced at the blanket; it seemed a fragile barrier to protect her life.

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“You’ll be fine as long as the sunlight doesn’t touch you. I’ll keep you safe,” he promised.

She believed him. He would keep her safe as long as it was within his capabilities. But Raven could remember her father promising the same thing. She had known that he would give up his very life to protect her, but in the end, it hadn’t been enough. But what choice did she have? She draped the blanket around her shoulders. It was big enough to wrap around her body and cover her head.

“So what’s the plan?” she asked.

“We’re going to walk right through the castle.”

Her mouth dropped open. “What?”

A smile curved his lips. Then, as she stared at him in disbelief, he vanished and before her stood Grieffen, the fire-demon. He was huge, his skin dark red, like burnt hide, his eyes cruel slits. Even his scent changed, and Raven shuddered at the dark, smoky smell. As he reached for her, she had to force herself not to step back from his touch as those vicious claws gently drew the blanket up over her head, plunging her into darkness. A low chuckle rang in her ears, and then she was lifted and slung over his shoulder as though she was weightless, his huge hand resting on the curve of her bottom.

“Well, my pretty,” she heard him murmur, his hand squeezing her buttock, “shall we go?”

She held herself frozen against him, quite unable to move. Logic told her that this really wasn't a fire-demon, that Kael was under there somewhere, but logic didn't have a lot to do with it. He felt like a fire-demon, he smelled like a fire-demon.

The journey seemed to go on forever. Even under the blanket, she kept her eyes tight shut. She gnawed on her lower lip, body tense as she waited for Kael to be stopped, questioned. The blanket would be ripped from her, exposing her to the deadly light of the sun. Sorien had told her that this was how he planned she would die when the time of the sacrifice arrived. Staked out on the altar in the great hall as the sun rose. Burnt from the outside in, until no more than a pile of cinders remained.

Think of other things.

Her dreams and visions of Kael...

She'd wanted him in those visions, now she finally admitted she wanted him still. She wasn't ready to believe in that happy ending, but at least she would have the chance to experience something good before she died. And once the deed was done, the prophecy could no longer come to pass, and her worst fear could be laid to rest. She would make it happen. Her body tightened at the thought. Heat flooded her. She tried to tell herself that anyone would be hot draped across the shoulder of a fire-demon. But it didn't help; she was burning, turning molten, melting.

Finally, a door slammed shut behind them, a bolt rammed across and she was lowered onto some sort of a chair.

"Stay covered for a moment," he said.

She sat very still, listening as he moved about the room. After a few minutes he came back to her and tugged the blanket from her head. She blinked in the dim light then glanced up at him. He had changed back; it was once more Kael who stood before

her, the loathed fire-demon banished. And her breath left her in a sigh of relief.

Kael had drawn the blinds down over the narrow windows, limiting the daylight to a dim glow; now he leaned across and switched on a lamp and she looked around. They were in a circular room lined with bookshelves. She was seated in a leather chair in front of a large wooden desk.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“At the top of the east tower in some sort of office, but it looks as though it hasn’t been used in a while,” Kael said. “We should be safe in here. Soon, they’ll be too busy worry about anything but keeping out the enemy.”

She turned back to him. Her eyes lingered on the broad shoulders, the wide chest, and the swell of muscle. As she watched, he slowly unbuckled the shoulder holster and shrugged out of it, dropping it carelessly on the desk. His eyes never left her as his hands moved to his waist, unbuckled the black leather belt that held the knife sheath and pulled it free, dropping it beside the gun. The faded jeans hung low on his hipbones; and she could see the bulge of his manhood, swollen, pressing against the soft material. He really did want her. Slowly, she licked her lips.

All the way up here, Kael had been mentally lecturing himself. Telling himself that this was just part of the job, trying to convince himself that sex with Raven was just something that had to be done, not something he was starting to crave with all of his being. But the feel of her so close, the swell of her bottom beneath his hand, the way she occasionally wriggled her body against him, the press of her soft breasts against his back, made that an impossibility.

The truth was, he wanted her with a desperation he hadn’t thought himself capable of.

But he needed to stay in control. He couldn't let her see the extent of his desire. She was already frightened, and who could blame her? After all, all she knew of sex was what she had witnessed in the great hall and that was no doubt enough to put anyone off.

But she wasn't making it easy. Her eyes were fixed on his groin in what appeared to be fascination. He tried to tell himself it was only wishful thinking on his part, but his cock refused to listen. It twitched and pulsed inside his jeans. Then she licked her lower lip, and he almost groaned. He remembered the feel of her feeding from him, the sensual tug as she sucked his blood, and his cock pulsed again. What would it feel like if she fed while he was buried deep inside her?

She caught her lower lip with sharp-pointed teeth. A small bead of blood oozed crimson and she licked it away. This time he couldn't restrain the groan, and her gaze darted to his face. Her eyes seemed to stare straight through him, into his very soul. She clearly didn't like what she saw there, because a frown tugged down the corners of her mouth. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he muttered. Then he shook his head. "Hell, Raven. I'm trying to do the right thing here. I have to do this. It's something that needs to be done, but I don't want to frighten you any more than I have to. Jesus." He ran an unsteady hand through his hair.

She stared at him. "I'm not frightened."

He studied her closely. No, she didn't appear frightened. As he watched she shrugged out of the blanket, letting it pool around her waist. She was perfection—luminous skin, long slender limbs, her breasts full beneath the thin cotton. The ragged grasp he had on his control slipped a little further.

He took a step closer. "Perhaps you should be."

Raven could see his fierce control in the way his fists clenched at his sides. His whole body pulsed with tension.

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And she realized something. She didn't want him in control. She wanted him wild. She wanted to release all the ferocious savagery she sensed lurking beneath the surface. She just didn't know how. She knew he wanted her. The evidence was there right in front of her eyes, huge and swollen.

His eyes locked onto her, hooded, half-closed, a glittering, intense electric-blue, but still he didn't move, and frustration clawed at her insides. Her own eyes narrowed and, holding his gaze, she trailed trembling fingertips down over the bulge in his jeans.

"What the hell...?" he growled.

He moved suddenly, his hand coming down on hers, covering it, pressing it hard against him. Beneath his hand, her fingers molded to his length and a tremor ran through his body. She squeezed, and his head fell back. His eyes closed. Then his hand tightened on hers and he dragged it away.

She stared at him. "Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I promised I wouldn't hurt you, and you're not making this easy." Raven frowned, and he continued, "It's been a long time for me. I want to make it good for you, but I'm afraid of losing control."

A wild thrill ran through her at his words. "I want you to lose control."

"What?"

But instead of answering she reached for him again, trailing a finger down over his chest, hooking it into the waistband of his jeans, and pulling him toward her. For a moment he resisted.

Then with a groan of defeat he gave in. Reaching down, he grasped the hem of his T shirt and tugged it over his head, tossing it to the floor. Raven released her hold on him and sat back, eyes wide. His hand went to his waist and she followed the movement, only her gaze moving as she sat perfectly still. He was almost painfully aroused now and he flicked open the button, pulled down the zip, almost moaned with relief. And still she didn't move. He kicked off his boots and then dragged his jeans down and off.

Then he straightened to stand before her, naked.

Chapter Nine

Oh my God.

Raven had never seen anything quite so beautiful in her entire life. His body was perfect, lean but with the sleek ripple of muscle under golden skin. His erection arched away from his flat belly, thick and powerful. It twitched under her intense stare, and her mouth went dry. She tried to swallow, but the muscles in her throat constricted.

“Like what you see?”

At his question, her gaze darted to his. He was watching her watch him. She nodded mutely, and a look of fierce satisfaction flashed across his face.

“You’re wearing too many clothes,” he murmured. “Come here.”

She rose slowly to her feet, her gaze never leaving his as his hands smoothed down her arms, sending shivers rippling through her. He tugged her tank top out of her jeans, then over her head in one smooth move. His gaze dropped, and she held her breath.

Did he like what he saw?

Her nipples tightened under his stare, as his hands moved to her waist, thumbs rubbing circles on her rib cage, sending tingles down her nerves. He unfastened her jeans, sliding his hands inside, pushing them down over her hips, and she wriggled

out of them.

And she was as naked as he was.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured.

One finger trailed over her collar bone, then lower, cupping her breast, and pleasure streaked through her, settling low in her body. His hands shifted to her hips and he picked her up, settling her on the cool wood of the desk behind her.

He traced 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. Her father had told her it marked her as a daughter of the Morrigan. All the witches carried the birthmark.

Then he stroked the skin of her thighs, his long fingers slipping between to push them apart, so he could move closer. Heat radiated from his body, and she breathed in the hot scent of the sweat starting to gild his golden skin. His hands glided up her body, trailing fire over her belly and breasts before they finally rested in her hair. He tilted her face to him and then leaned down to kiss her, hungry, biting kisses, until she opened her mouth and his tongue thrust deep inside. He tasted hot and sweet, reminding her of the blood she had drunk days ago. The thought made her tremble.

He leaned back and stared down into her face.

“Tell me what you want.”

Frustration flashed through her. She didn’t know what she wanted; how could she? All she knew was she wanted it all.

“Everything,” she said. “I want everything.”

He laughed softly. Reaching behind her, he swept the desk clean, his gun and knife clattering to the floor. Then he pushed her gently, so she fell back against the hard wood.

“Let me show you how it can be.”

Leaning over her, arms braced on either side, he kissed her breasts, his tongue teasing her with lazy, wet circles until her back arched. She gasped as he bit down on her nipple, then drew it into his mouth, suckling so it tugged at places deep within her body, sharp bolts of pleasure shooting through her.

Her body shook. She wanted to touch him, stroke him, kiss him, but in this position, she couldn't reach, and she writhed under his touch.

“Shh, sweetheart,” he crooned. “Just relax, take it slowly.”

Was he mad? “I can't,” she muttered, gritting her teeth.

He straightened, stared down at her through hooded eyes then slowly splayed one hand over the soft flesh of her stomach, teasing the dark curls at the junction of her thighs, stopping just short of touching her where she needed it most. Then he smiled, a feral smile. “You've got no choice.”

Like hell she had no choice! It seemed as though all her life she hadn't had a choice. Now she did, and she didn't want it slow. She wanted him hard and fast and as out of control as she felt.

She lay before him, quiescent, staring up into the blueness of his eyes, her own narrowed while she considered her options.

Then she stretched sinuously beneath him. Reaching out, she twined her fingers in the

soft fur of his abdomen, trailed them down lower until she teased him with her fingertips. She raised one long slender leg, wrapped it around him and pulled him to her so he was hard against her sex, and she moved erotically, grinding her hips against the length of him.

He groaned, and she purred in satisfaction. His hand moved between them, gliding down her body, between her thighs. He groaned again as his fingers slid into the hot slippery wetness, moving slowly over her swollen flesh, tingles shooting through her, stroking, gently probing, opening her. Poised above her, his erection pushed at the entrance to her body. His hands moved to clasp her hips, steadying her. Then he pushed inside, stretching her. He was huge, and she bit back a whimper of pain-tinged pleasure. Pausing, he stared down into her face, his own contorted with concentration.

“More?” he questioned.

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She bucked her hips in response, and he lowered himself, filling her inch by inch until he was fully sheathed inside her.

Raven closed her eyes and allowed a wave of euphoria to wash over her. It was over; whatever else happened, Sorien could never use her now. Then Kael was moving inside her, and all thoughts of Sorien were washed away on a rising wave of pleasure. His movements held an edge of desperation that sent a thrill pulsating through her. She could sense his ragged control, the contained power of each thrust. She moaned in pleasure, and the sound released something inside him. His hands gripped her hips, his fingers biting into the soft flesh of her bottom, holding her as he increased the force of his thrusts, filling her to the core, grinding his body against her.

The whole world shrank until there was nothing but the sensation of him plunging inside her. Raven could feel something building and building, concentrating on that one spot between her thighs, but still the climax took her by surprise, exploding, a tidal wave of feeling that washed over her, pulling her under so she was drowning, fighting to keep the air in her lungs.

She threw back her head and opened her mouth to scream her release, and Kael covered her lips with his, swallowing her screams while his own body exploded deep within her. He lifted his head to stare down into her eyes. His hands came up to wrap around her throat, the pads of his thumbs caressing the fragile bones of her neck.

“Shall I kill you now, Raven? Do you still want to die?”

A bolt of shock ran through her as she remembered his promise.

“No,” she murmured. “I want to live.”

Kael held her limp and sated body in his arms as they cuddled together in the huge leather chair. She nuzzled his chest, her tongue stroking delicately across the flesh, licking the beads of sweat from his skin, and his grip tightened. She glanced up, her huge eyes luminous.

“Talk to me,” she murmured.

“What about?”

She shrugged. “Anything, nothing. Tell me how this happened. Why it happened.”

He thought for a moment. This was really just an episode in a story that had been going on for millennia. But he had to start somewhere. “What do you know of your mother?”

“My mother?” A frown flickered across her face. “Not much. My father didn’t like to speak of her. Why? Did you know her?”

“I know of her.”

“Know?” Raven questioned. “You mean she’s alive.”

“Your father told you she was dead?”

“No, I just presumed it, I suppose. The only thing he ever said about her was that none of this was her fault.”

Kael snorted in disbelief. “Well, he lied. She should have had more sense than to fall in love with a vampire. All of this is her fault.” He ran a hand through his hair, then smiled ruefully. “Okay, maybe not all. Maybe none. Some of the blame has to go to your father, and your aunt, and me.”

“And some to the fire-demons.”

A shadow of a smile crossed his face. “Of course.”

“So what was she like?”

“You know she was a witch?”

Raven nodded.

“The witches have great powers,” he said. “It’s rumored that they can even control the sun and moon, and others—like you—can foretell the future. The Council has been at war with the fire-demons for over two thousand years. We’re the only thing that stops them spreading over the whole earth. Just over twenty years ago, the war was going badly for us, and Darius wanted to approach the witches for guidance. I refused him permission—witches can’t be trusted. No one really knows where their allegiances lie, if they have any. Darius went anyway.” He glanced at her and smiled. “Your father was never one to take well to authority.”

“He always said rules were for breaking.”

“Arrogant bastard. So he went, and he returned and told the Council that it had gone well; the witches were considering the request. What we didn’t know—and didn’t discover until much later, after she had returned to her sisters—was that Darius had fallen hard for your mother. Had, in fact, abducted her and seduced her.”

“Wow. He never told me that.”

“No, not one of his finest moments. He claims she loved him back, but when her sisters found her, she went with them willingly, and she hasn’t been seen since. Nine months later Regan, your aunt, reappeared with you. She handed you over to your father, then told the Council of the prophecy.”

Raven twisted a little on his lap so she could look into his face. “But she never said where my mother was, or whether she was still alive?”

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Should he tell her what the witch had told them? She had a right to know. “All she said was your mother had gone where Darius would never find her. And he didn’t, though I know he searched.”

“So what happened next?”

He blew out his breath, and his arms tightened around her. The next bit was hard. Would she hate him? “I gave the order to have you killed.”

She pursed her lips together tightly, a shadow crossing her face. “Why?” she asked.

“You have to understand—I was furious with Darius, and my decision was made in anger. I regretted it almost immediately. You were an innocent baby, but it was too late. Your father was gone. We hunted for him, but he managed to evade us, and we heard nothing from him until he came with the news of your capture by the fire-demons. He was badly injured, but he survived, and we’ve been working together, searching for you, ever since.”

“So how did you find me now?”

“We received a message. We don’t know who sent it, but it led us to you.”

They were both silent for a while. He tugged at her rigid form, and she relaxed against him.

“Why do you hate them?” she asked. “The witches I mean? I can hear it in your voice.”

Did he hate them? He thought back to his own dealings with the witches, and the dull ache of that memory washed over him. But she deserved to know the truth.

“Long ago,” he said slowly, “I too went to the witches for guidance. They told me nothing but delayed me with promises of knowledge and power. When I finally left, it was to find that the fire-demons had attacked my people. They were wiped out. If I had been there, perhaps I could have somehow saved them.”

“Or perhaps you would have been killed as well. Maybe the witches saw that and prevented your death.” She leaned across and laid a soft kiss in the hollow beneath his throat. “I’m sorry about your people.”

Kael shrugged. “It was a long time ago. And leading the Council has given me purpose. I get to kill fire-demons. What more could I want?”

She smiled at him then. “What more do you want, Kael?” she asked, moving her body sinuously against his. He bit back a groan; he was already hard again, aching for her.

But while he wanted her, he wanted more than sex, at least the hope of more, and fear gnawed at him. Did she feel the same? He stroked a finger down her cheek, under her chin, tilting her face so he could look into her eyes. “My people mated for life,” he said, “and always with their own kind. When they were destroyed, I lost all hope of someone of my own. Now I want back what I thought lost forever. I want a family, a future. With you.”

Chapter Ten

Raven could see the truth of his words in his eyes, and a wave of longing washed over her. Could it happen? Could there be a life for her beyond this evil place? She wanted that life so much it was a pain piercing her chest. “I want that too,” she said.

He released his breath then and smiled. “But that’s for the future. For now, I want to make love to you, this time for us. Not to stop Sorien, or to prevent a prophecy, but because we want to.” He paused as if unsure whether to go on. “And I want you to feed from me again.”

Raven’s body quickened at his words. Her gums tingled as her fangs sharpened in anticipation. She stared at him hungrily, and he smiled, then slowly leaned back to rest his head against the chair, tempting her with the long line of his throat. She wriggled round so she was kneeling, straddling his lean hips, then leaned forward, inhaling the warm, animal musk of his body and the sweet scent of blood so close to the surface. A pulse thundered beneath his skin and she tasted it with the tip of her tongue. One huge fist came up to wrap in her long hair, tugging her against him. She paused for a brief moment, then sank her fangs deep into his flesh. The blood spurted hot against her tongue, and she swallowed convulsively.

Kael’s hands slid down to cup her backside. He lifted her, spreading her flesh with gentle fingers, impaling her upon the hard length of him while she suckled at his neck. Unlike the first time, this was slow, seductive, each move deliberate, an erotic drag of his flesh against her own, the feel of his strong hands guiding her, pressing her down onto him.

Finally, one appetite sated, she released his throat. She licked the wound then raised her head, staring down into his electric-blue eyes as the pleasure swelled and their climaxes shuddered through them.

“Mine,” he growled.

“And you are mine,” she murmured. She twined her fingers into his golden hair, pulled him toward her. “I think you’ve always been mine.” He frowned, and she continued. “I first saw you when I was fourteen. You came into my dreams and then my waking visions. I knew you would come for me one day. But as I got older it became harder to believe.”

“I’m here now, and we’re going to be together.”

He kissed her, and she sank into the sensation, willing to believe him at last, feeling safe for the first time since she had been captured.

They were disturbed by a faint buzz. Kael frowned then slipped from the chair, lifting her and placing her on the seat. Immediately, she felt bereft, alone, the feeling of safety draining away.

He rummaged through his clothes and came up with the cell phone, a frown flashing across his face. She watched as he listened.

“Who did this?” he growled after a moment, and a black cloud of foreboding filled her mind. Kael listened for a while longer, then dropped the phone onto the desk. He ran a hand through his hair.

“We have to get out of here,” he said.

She got to her feet looking around for her clothes. “What’s happened?”

“We’ve been betrayed. I told you not all the Council were in agreement with our actions. Darius has been imprisoned, along with those in the army loyal to me. For now, the attack has been stopped. We’re on our own.” He stroked her hair. “Don’t worry. We’ll get out of here before Sorien even knows you’re missing.”

He lowered his hand then stepped away, picking up her clothes and tossing them to her. “Get dressed. It can’t be long until nightfall.”

She pulled on her clothes, fighting the fear that tore at her insides.

She wanted to believe him, but she knew it was impossible for them to escape the castle without aid. Besides, she could hear movement in the castle below, a multitude of heavy feet, faint voices raised in panic. A feeling of dread engulfed her, smothering her dreams under a blanket of loss and regret.

“It’s too late,” she said. “They’ve found Grieffen. They know I’m gone, and they’re searching for me.”

She stared into his face; in such a short time he had come to mean everything to her. For a brief moment she’d allowed herself to hope, but she should have remembered how dangerous hope was. She knew the choices—they could die together now, or Kael could escape, and she would die later. Either way she would die. But in the end, there was no real choice. She had resigned herself to death many times, but she couldn’t bear the thought of Kael sharing that death.

“You have to leave me.”

He was silent, and she could feel the panic tightening in her guts. “You’ve done what you needed to do. I accepted my death long ago. I only hated the thought that it would bring victory to Sorien. You’ve saved me from that, and I’m not afraid to die.”

His jaw clenched. "I won't leave you here to die alone."

He was resolute, and she groped frantically through her mind for a way to convince him to go. But, as she stared at him, her eyesight wavered, and she experienced the strange flickering at the edges of her brain that always preceded her visions. She wanted to scream, not now, but the vision was already upon her. Her lids fluttered closed and, played out on the screen of her mind, she saw a brief glimpse of the future. And she knew then what she had to do.

Pain tore through her, but she forced herself to open her eyes and smile. A look of disbelief flickered across Kael's features.

"What have you seen?" he asked.

"I have seen our future."

"What?"

"I've seen our future. I've held our baby in my arms. Kael, we will survive this. If you escape, you can come back for me. They won't kill me yet. They don't even know of your presence. They won't know I'm no longer a virgin. I'll tell them Grieffen got too close, I overpowered him and stole his keys."

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He was watching her through narrowed eyes, and her panic rose. She had to make him listen. He had to go. The alternative was too hard to bear. “Don’t you understand? If you stay, then we both die, and our child will never be born.”

She could hear pounding feet on the stairs, slamming doors as the fire-demons searched each room. “Kael, you do come back for me—I have seen it.”

His hands fisted at his sides, the muscles of his face rigid, his eyes wild. But she could sense that he was wavering. She pushed. “Kael, I want our future; I want our children. You have to go.”

Kael threw back his head in a silent roar of despair. Then he reached out, gripped her shoulders. “You have seen this future?”

She nodded.

He took her face between his hands and stared down into her eyes. “You don’t die,” he growled. “Whatever they do to you, stay alive for me. I will come for you, Raven.”

He dragged her against him and kissed her savagely. Then he pushed her from him. A moment later he vanished, and a sky-blue moth alighted gently on her hand. She carried it to the narrow window and watched as it stepped from her hand to the blind. A moment later it disappeared behind the edge and out into the open air.

As soon as he was gone, Raven was filled with a frantic urge to call him back. Because now, when it was too late, she finally understood the true meaning of her visions. She knew why she had been shown Kael all those years ago. It wasn’t only

desire that drew her to him, it was love.

She collapsed to her knees, a scream ripping through her mind. And she wept then. For the first time since her capture, the hot tears spilled over, filling her eyes with red haze for the baby she would never hold.

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the images, but before her closed lids the vision replayed itself, over and over again, taunting her with the future and the lies she had told. For there had been no baby in her vision, only Raven, stretched out upon the altar in the great hall. She was staring up into Sorien's hate-ridden, triumphant eyes as the sun slowly rose behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Be strong...

The words echoed in her mind, and Raven took courage from them.

She didn't know what had happened to Kael after he'd left. Something, because she knew he would have come for her otherwise. But whatever had happened, she sensed that he was somewhere in this world, that he still lived. As did her father, and it comforted her that there were people out there who would mourn her passing. They would know that today was her birthday, the day of the prophecy.

Were they thinking of her?

She'd made no attempt to hide after Kael had gone that day, and the fire-demons had found her almost immediately. But Sorien believed her story. She had received a savage beating and been returned to her cell, but she would have fared much worse if he'd suspected the truth.

The last few weeks had been an agony of hope, but now she had attained some level of peace, and at least she could die knowing that the fire-demons would gain nothing from her death.

It would be over soon. Once she would have welcomed this; now her soul cried out against it. She wanted to live; she wanted to spend eternity with Kael, to bear his children. She loved him, and she longed for the chance to tell him so, somehow to lessen the pain he would feel at her death. He had lost so many already.

But it was too late, for the time had come, and she was living through that final vision.

She opened her eyes and stared straight into Sorien's vicious face. A smile played across his features, triumph gleaming in his coal-black eyes.

"Well, the time is here at last," he murmured, stroking a claw-like finger down her throat. "Can you feel the sunrise so close?"

Raven turned her head away. She lay stretched out on the altar. She wasn't tied, but a fire-demon stood at her head and one at her feet, their claws around her wrists and ankles, shackling her to the smooth, cold stone. Through the stained-glass window above her she could clearly see the blood-red glow of the coming dawn.

The sun touched her feet first, a prickle of heat in her toes. Soon the prickle became a sharp, searing pain and she bit back a whimper. The scent of charred flesh filled the air and the pain expanded until it consumed her whole mind. She squeezed her eyes shut, clenched her jaw against the scream that tore at her throat. She tried to think of making love with Kael, the sweet taste of his blood, but the pain grew until it was a giant fist squeezing the air from her lungs, ripping the very thoughts from her mind.

Just as she thought she could hold back her scream no longer, the light dimmed. Behind her closed lids she sensed the dawn fading, and the flames that licked at her body flickered and died. She opened her eyes; beyond the window the rising sun had been banished, eclipsed by a vast black shadow so only a faint glimmer of light still showed.

The window above her exploded and a huge, winged creature hovered in the opening, its wings beating the air as it searched the room. Then the creature threw back its head and screamed before diving for the altar.

Raven kicked out viciously at the fire-demon holding her feet, then hissed and bared her fangs at the other. They appeared dazed, staring at the creature, backing away. But Sorien was still beside her, his face twisted into a mask of fury and determination. He drew a long knife, raised it high above her with a scream of rage. But, as he brought it down, the creature slammed into him, knocking him from his feet, then picking him up in its talons and hurling him across the room. At the same time the huge wooden doors burst open and a swarm of people flooded in, bringing with them a brief flash of hope. Was this Kael's army?

But Raven couldn't watch; her whole attention was taken by the winged creature landing lightly at the foot of the altar. She stared into its deep-blue eyes and knew him.

"Kael?"

He lifted her almost gently in his talons and flew with her to the shadows in the corner of the room. She almost fell as her scorched foot touched the floor, then Kael stood before her. He went down on his knees and lifted her foot. He kissed the reddened, charred skin before staring up into her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Sorry?" Raven shook her head, not quite believing that this was happening. "You saved me."

She swayed toward him, and he stood up quickly, taking her in his arms, pulling her almost roughly against him. She was shaking, touching him, running her hands over whatever parts of him she could reach. Checking that he was real. All around, the sounds of fighting filled the air, but she ignored them, focusing only on Kael.

He ran a trembling hand through his hair. "I can't believe we were almost too late."

“Tell me what happened?” she asked.

“I was taken as soon as I transformed outside the castle—traitors in the Council. They used magic to bind me in my human form and imprisoned me with your father.”

“You escaped?”

He looked uncomfortable. “With a little help.”

He nodded in the direction of the fighters. It was chaotic, but after a moment she saw Sorien was up and was fighting a tall, slender figure. With a flash of shock she realized it was a woman with long blond hair that whipped about her face as she spun and twirled. She was holding her own against the huge fire-demon; in fact, she appeared to be toying with him. She was fighting back-to-back with a tall, dark-haired man, and Raven’s eyes widened as she recognized her father. Her gaze flew back to the woman and, briefly, the fight seemed to stand still as their gazes clashed. The woman had pale silver eyes, rimmed with black, witch’s eyes. She flashed a smile, then she was whirling away, and Raven turned back to Kael.

“Your mother,” he said dryly.

“She helped you?”

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“It seems she didn’t know about the prophecy until recently.”

“So who...?”

“Her sister, Regan. Apparently, when you were born, she had a vision telling her of the prophecy but also foreseeing that one day your father would kill your mother. So she sent your mother to the shadowlands after telling her you were dead, stillborn. She returned recently and only then discovered what had happened.”

“Three months ago?” Raven asked.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“She spoke to me. I heard her voice.”

“Well, she’s done what she can to put things right. She sent the original message telling us where you were. She kept away because she was going against her sisters, but when we failed to get you out, she came to find us.” He grinned. “She’s a formidable woman, your mother.”

“Did she do that?” Raven nodded in the direction of the window where a black sun hung in the morning sky.

Kael nodded. “Hmm, I told you there are rumors that they can control the sun and the moon. Well, it appears that the rumors are true.”

At that moment, obviously bored with playing with Sorien, her mother made one

final sideswipe with her blade and sliced his head cleanly from his body. For a moment the torso scrabbled at the air before tumbling lifelessly to the ground.

“Messy,” Kael murmured beside her, “but effective.”

Sorien’s body crumbled until nothing remained but a pile of ochre ashes. A curious lightness filled her. The nightmare of the prophecy was finally over. She could start to dream again. Her mother had leaped back into the fighting, still with Darius at her back.

He would never kill her. Would he?

But what did she really know of these people? They were strangers to her, though perhaps she would now have a chance to get to know them.

“Definitely formidable.” Raven muttered. “Are she and my father...?”

Kael shrugged. “Who knows? Or at this moment cares?” He pulled her deeper into the shadows, dragged her to him, covering her face with hungry kisses.

“I’ve been going insane,” he muttered. “I kept telling myself I would save you, that you had seen our future together, our children.”

Little tendrils of guilt prodded at her mind. Should she tell him of her lie? She’d made the only choice she could, but would he understand that? She smoothed a finger over the lines of stress that cut deep into his face.

She would tell him later, she decided, a long time later. Perhaps she would make those children a reality first. At the thought of Kael’s children, a wave of longing washed over her. What would they be—vampire, witch, shape-shifter? Some combination of all three? She would find out in time.

She pressed herself against his hard chest, then raked her fingers through his sunlight hair, pulling his head down, kissing his jaw, his cheek, his lips, touching and tasting.

“I love you,” he murmured against her mouth.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him to her, melting against him. He had been her dream for so long, and now he was her reality. She kissed him once more, then spoke the words she had been longing to say. “And I love you.”

The End