



The Nephilim War:  
**Resurrection**  
By  
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## Chapter One

Raven paced. He knew his behavior would be a clear indicator to his interrogator of his mental state, but he didn't care. The last thing he wanted to do was mess this up. Too much time had passed and he had suffered too much to let this summons go to waste. So much was at stake; his sanity, his happiness, his very existence hung in the balance. He couldn't sit quietly while so much was set against him.

He dragged his fingers through his hair, knowing it was far too wild and bedraggled for his current surroundings. What he didn't know was why he had been sent for. Whatever the reason, he would use the opportunity to finally free himself.

"You'll find your wait more pleasant if you relax, Raven. Sit. Enjoy the music. I find there's nothing a good song can't remedy." The receptionist stared up at him, tapping one silver clog to the beat and bobbing her head back and forth. Her glasses were perched precariously at the tip of her nose and her voice was a perverse mix of Ethel Merman and Grandma Moses. "Oh, I just love Wagner. He's my guilty pleasure. *Ride of the Valkyries* is my favorite of all his compositions."

He glanced again at the tiny sentry behind the desk. "So the music artist was a rebel." Raven could respect a rebel, someone who strayed from the norm. An individual like he was. Though if things went his way today, his days of individuality were history. "What did he do?"

"If you weren't German, he didn't much like you. He was a little too patriotic, and as it would turn out, he became a major inspiration for Adolph Hitler."

Now that was a name Raven recognized and loathed. He paused to listen. The melodic refrain dropped to a somber melody and teased. Slowly, exquisitely, it built, gradually becoming louder. The notes fell faster, until finally it rose again in triumphant exultation. It was a masterful composition. It made him feel like finding an old Viking ship, hiring some Vikings, and riding out to pillage and ravish. "Sounds like a battle song."

"I guess it does."

"Raven."

Raven turned to face the man filling the open doorway. He looked precisely as Raven remembered, tall, with close-cropped black hair. His cherubic mouth and rounded cheeks had always made him look serene, but today that serenity was marred by the deep creases around his eyes.

It was like stepping back in time. "Michael."

"Please," Michael said, motioning Raven in. "Time is of the essence."

Raven walked to the door, stepped into the sterile space behind his host, crossed to the lone piece of furniture in the room--an unadorned oak desk--and stood opposite Michael, who had stationed himself behind the desk to wait.

Michael waved his hand absently. "Have a seat, Raven."

Raven nearly emitted a gasp of surprise when he felt the pressure of solid wood against the back of his leg. Twisting half way around, he saw an overstuffed armchair now sat in what had been empty space a moment ago.

"Slick," Raven muttered, as he settled his weight into the thick cushions.

Michael had created a similar chair for himself, and now sat facing Raven, fingers entwined and resting on the desk before him.

Raven decided to let Michael speak before he threw himself on Michael's mercy. He might as well maintain whatever dignity he could for as long as possible.

"I trust your journey here was comfortable?"

Raven folded his hands in his lap and focused all of his energy on maintaining a calm façade. "I have no complaints in that regard."

"I will be to the point, Raven. Azriel has escaped."

Raven shook his head, thinking for a moment that he hadn't heard correctly. "What do you mean he escaped?"

"I don't know how he did it. He was bound in the outer darkness of Dudael. Escape in any manner should have been impossible."

"I know well the skill of your binding men." Raven lifted his wrists to display the healing red welts marring his skin. "And I know the difficulties inherent in existing far below the earth in a place so old even time has forgotten it. If you have brought me here to heap new accusations on me ...." He swallowed the next words and forced his fists into his lap. This was his one chance at freedom. He didn't want to be sent back to his prison. Arguing with Michael would be the quickest way to see his plans ruined. "I don't know how he escaped. He's the only who has managed it. The rest of the Watchers remain captive."

"I didn't bring you here to accuse you. I know you didn't have anything to do with the escape. I brought you here because I need your help."

Loud, raucous laughter echoed off the cream-white walls of the office. Raven couldn't help himself. "You come to me for help?" He threw his head back and laughed again. "How very rich of you, old friend. You want me to come to your aid when you refused to lift a finger to come to mine?"

"You made your own choices, Raven."

"You want me to round the rogue up and take him back to Dudael with me? You forget, his prison was kept a secret from us. I wouldn't know where within Dudael to take him. I suppose I could take him to be bound with the rest of us, but Azriel always thought he was above us."

Lips drawn down into a scowl, Michael edged closer to the desk. "Things are more serious than you think, Raven. The future of man ...."

"And what do I care for the future of man, our Father's chosen few? Why do you care what happens to man? They've never done anything for you." He rose from his seat and paced. He'd been ready to throw himself on Michael's mercy. He would have done anything to free himself from his unfair imprisonment, but he would not lower himself so far as to become a patron of men.

"Hear me out, Raven. Are you so ready to return to your pit and your chains?"

"I am not playing the patsy for men. Or for you. What, do you propose, I help them so you can pat me on the head then send me back to Dudael?"

"Hear me out. Please."

It was the please that got him. That one word told Raven more than anything else Michael could have said. Against his better judgment, Raven settled back into his chair.

Michael rose and went to a water cooler that had appeared sometime when Raven wasn't looking. Michael poured a cup of cold water for himself and one for Raven. Returning, he handed Raven a cup and sat on the corner of his desk. "Azriel flies with the wind. If he succeeds with his plans, a war unlike any you have ever seen will rage. Unlike the first war that ripped the heavens into two factions. All manner of creatures will walk the earth. Already the ghouls have come out of hiding. If Azriel has his way, evil will reign. Blood will flow like water, and fire will pour from the heavens. Life as we know it will come to an end, and the future of good will hang in the balance."

"Haven't lost your touch for the melodramatic, I see. Anyway, I've read the book. Hell, I watched John write the book. Fire and brimstone and all the rest of it."

"This isn't revelation, Raven, and it's not Armageddon. As you know, that book has been written, the end decided. What faces us now is the unknown. If Azriel succeeds, anything is possible. Do you understand that? Anything."

"Even if such a thing were to happen, why should I care? It would mean my freedom."

Michael set his cup down and stared levelly at Raven. "Come on, Raven, I know you. I know you wouldn't want this any more than I would."

Raven turned from Michael and got to his feet again, pacing. "If it meant my freedom, I wouldn't care. You don't know what it's been like for me. Millennia after millennia pass, and I remain bound in that pit. You cannot know what it's like, you in your lofty office. I have the stench of foul bodies as my air, and the heat of the earth around me. I have my own desires to keep me company and no woman to ever fill them. This human body I left the heavens to have has become a prison for me. Lust, Michael, and want and need, that is what I've become. I want my freedom. If Azriel's little act of treason sets me free, I won't stop it. No matter the cost."

"Raven."

He stopped pacing to face Michael. "What Michael?"

"Help us and you shall have your freedom. You have my word."

Raven stared, unconvinced. "And what does The Other say?"

"It was on His word that I sent for you."

Raven collapsed into his chair. "But why me? Why not you?"

"You know nobody from the heavenly realm can interfere."

"And men? Why can't they help their own?"

"No man can stand up to the power of Azriel. You know that. And he must be destroyed."

There was the laughter again. Raven couldn't help himself. "Do you forget the rules so easily? I can't kill Azriel. An angel cannot kill another, fallen or not."

"Of course *you* can't kill Azriel. Nevertheless, he must be stopped."

"You have your nerve."

"We've tried to contact him ourselves. He refuses to answer our calls. We've sent many to seek him, to convince him of the ramifications of what he's doing."

"Oh, I see." Raven folded his arms over his chest and glared. "Now you want me to step in."

"Raven, please. You have to understand."

"If Azriel hadn't escaped, you would have left me in Dudael to rot. What else is there for me to understand?"

Michael rose and met Raven's stare. When he spoke, his voice was steel. "Understand that three decades ago, a Nephilim male journeyed from the Nephilim realm of Hir na Gog to the earthly dominion."

"What do I care of the Nephilim?" he asked with a shrug.

"They can't survive in the human realm, but this one was alive long enough to copulate with a human female and fill her with his seed. Thirty years ago, that infant was born."

Raven sank further into his chair as the ramifications became clear.

He didn't want to think about this. He wanted to be angry. He had a right to be angry. "I don't care, Michael."

"Tell me you understand."

"The offspring is a danger. Damn you, I understand. What I don't understand is how you, in your great *wisdom*, allowed this to happen."

"I don't know." Michael sprang to his feet and pulled fingers through his hair. He was showing emotion for the first time. "The Nephilim aren't human, Raven, so don't look at me that way. Since their exile, we have no reign over them. Why should we keep tabs on the Nephilim?"

"Because they are a threat. For the love of God, Michael, there was a time when all of the eastern lands worshipped them as gods. When vampires and beastmen served them as slaves. You don't think they resent their fall from grace? They're too damned powerful for you not to keep tabs on, and they've had a long time to think about their defeat and plan their revenge. Believe me, Michael, I know." Raven eased forward on the chair and stared, dumbfounded, as realization dawned. "Azriel is looking for the infant, isn't he?"

"As we speak, Azriel seeks her. If he finds her, Raven .... I want you to find her first and tell her who she is."

"She has no idea?"

Michael lifted the water to his mouth and took a slow swallow. As he did, the calm returned to his face. "Today is her wedding day. She's a data entry clerk at her local bank." He paused. "She's quite good. Types about ninety words per minute."

"The future rests in the hands of a hack? And you want me to tell her who she is? It's up to me to prepare her to stand against Azriel? Oh, you don't ask much of me, do you?"

"There is one more small detail."

"Dare I ask?"

Michael smiled benevolently. "You cannot consort with her, Raven, she's half Nephilim. If you have sex with her, you know what will happen. Such a thing would be too dangerous."

"You've gone mad if you think I won't. I've gone too long without the touch of woman. If you put me with one now...."

"Time grows short, Raven, you must make your decision." When Raven didn't respond, Michael went on. "You must rescue the girl, Charity, from Azriel and take her to

Prague where Alaric the vampire lives in the winter months. Send Alaric to find Figlio. Figlio trusts Alaric as he trusts no other. With Figlio and Alaric comes the might of The Alliance. In the event of war, we'll need them. Do these things, and all is forgiven. You will be welcomed home with open arms. It's a promise from Him."

If Michael was to be believed--which obviously was the case, since lying was an art beyond any angel--Raven was being offered an opportunity to free himself from his millennia of bondage. It was what he had been prepared to beg for, now freedom was being offered to him. Until his summons on this very day he had never, not once, allowed himself to consider such a thing would actually happen. "When do I go?"

## Chapter Two

Charity gazed at her reflection and grimaced. She'd always thought her wedding day would be different. An extravaganza starring her in an ornate, full-skirted wedding gown with a veil that dragged fifteen feet behind her. The gown would be old fashioned, creamy white and perfect. Instead, she teetered around in a tight, mermaid-styled dress that made her feel more like one of the Zing Girls than a bride. Troy hadn't liked any of the dresses she wanted to wear. He thought that a more *inspiring* dress would make for a better wedding night.

She'd also wanted to wear her hair up in a fancy French twist, but Troy insisted she wear it down. She felt like Chala Chan. The look worked for Chala, but not so much for her. Her hair had been curled to within an inch of its life. The long, dark strands were twisted into ropey ringlets that covered her head and ran down her back. The worst, though, had to be all the damned hairspray. God help Troy if he tried to run his fingers through her hair. He was likely to lose a finger.

She looked horrible.

"You look beautiful."

Charity penguin-turned, teetering from side to side, and saw her mother standing in the door archway pressing a well-worn tissue around her eyes to mop up tears.

"Do you really think I'm doing the right thing, mom?"

"Oh baby, of course. A surgeon. Imagine my baby marrying a doctor. You can leave that awful job of yours and give me some grandchildren. Imagine the beautiful babies you and Troy will have."

"I'm starting to have second thoughts. I always thought I was made for something .... else." She didn't know what she had thought, but it wasn't this. Her heart longed for adventure, sang out for her to live, but her brain told her she'd better be sensible. She didn't want to end up like her mother, abandoned with a baby when she was practically a baby herself, left to scrimp out a meager existence and pray to God that she could make her daughter's life better than her own.

"Don't be silly, Charity. Don't look for something that doesn't exist. If you do, you'll end up alone and bitter." Her lips compressed into a grimace. "Don't throw away your only chance at happiness on a dream."

"I know. You're right." Charity turned to see her reflection in the vanity mirror one more time. *Not Chala Chan, Scary Spice*, she amended, with a grimace at her hair.

"You're lovely, baby."

Charity forced a smile to her lips. "Thanks, Mom."

"Listen. They're playing your song."

Charity's Uncle Joe appeared beside her mother. Despite his black tux and close shorn hair, the resemblance between the two was startling. His brown skin, wide russet eyes, and smile were nearly a perfect mirror of her mother's. His cheeks dimpled as his smile broadened. Charity knew the signature Perry dimples appeared on her face any time she smiled. She figured in about twenty years she, too, would be a mirror of her mother.

"Strike me dumb if Charity isn't the spitting image of you twenty years ago,



Joanne." Joe said, as though reading Charity's mind. He stepped into the small room and held out his hand. "Are you ready to take that walk, sweet thing?"

"Yeah, Uncle Joe." Charity swallowed the sour taste of bile that had risen in her throat. "As ready as I'll ever be."

Three minutes later Charity was standing before the altar trying not to hyperventilate. The cathedral was nothing like the modest Catholic Church she had grown up worshipping in. This place was oversized and overdone. Even with all of the costly accessories--marble statues and expensive art--strewn throughout the main chapel, the place had a cold, lifeless feel about it. Just the kind of church Troy's mother would insist her son be married in. All show and no heart.

She shook her head to clear it. If she kept on like this, she'd never make it through the day. Her head ached. On top of that, she was dizzy and nauseous. Behind her, the church was full of two hundred of Troy's closest family and friends, all murmuring to themselves, no doubt, about how silly her hair looked.

"Charity," she heard a familiar male voice hiss.

She was pulled from her musings to the present. The pastor was staring at her, raising his brows meaningfully.

"Your vows," Troy said in an angry whisper.

Dressed in his own crisply pressed black tuxedo, Troy looked incredibly handsome. With his flawless chocolaty skin and close cropped hair, he could have passed for a male model. His mustache was perfectly coiffed and his eyebrows had been plucked into a slight arch. He was the best-looking man Charity had ever dated, though right now his good looks were marred by a very hateful glare.

She shook her head clear a second time and attempted to recall her wedding vows. They had opted to write their own. "I'm sorry." She thought hard. "Oh, yeah. Today, Troy, I give more than my heart..." She stopped mid-sentence. "What on earth was that?"

The pastor flicked a hand in dismissal. "It's just a bit of thunder."

"I give my heart...", she resumed, but broke off a second time when a louder boom of thunder shook the church. She twisted around to see if the noise had disturbed anyone else. Rows of crowded, maple pews lined the chapel. A few of the people were wide-eyed, but for the most part, the guests merely stared back at her. "I give my ... I give more than my heart to you. I give you my entire ...."

A crack of lightning lit the afternoon sky seconds before another boom of thunder sounded. This one had been the loudest yet. Beneath her satin slippers the church floor began to rumble.

She chanced a look at Troy, who stared toward the church entrance, then up at the stained glass windows where the sky was lighting up like the Fourth of July. "What the hell?"

A crack of thunder rocked the church. People were beginning to get to their feet and murmur.

Outside, the wind blew. The high whistle of it was barely audible at first, but as the seconds passed, the noise grew louder. The wind picked up speed, setting off car alarms in the parking lot beside the church and sending stray objects careening into the building. Charity couldn't see them, but she could hear the impact they made when they

smashed against the brick exterior.

When thunder boomed again, people began to scream.

Troy's father leapt to his feet. "Hurricane!"

"Downstairs, everyone." As Pastor Thompson spoke, he rushed down the altar stairs. "It may be a tornado. We have to get into the basement. As long as everyone stays calm, we'll be all right."

Troy ran to his family in the first row of pews. His father was already on his feet, but the four women sat staring, unsure of what to do. Troy grabbed hold of his mother's arm and one of his sister's hands, hauled them to their feet, and set off behind the pastor without so much as a backward glance at Charity. Troy's father got the remaining girls in hand and followed suit.

"Troy!" she shouted, not able to believe what she was seeing. Then Uncle Joe was there. He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her gently away from the altar.

"Come on, Charity," he said. "It's not safe here."

Thunder cracked. The heavy cross behind the altar began to shake just as the beautiful stained-glass windows set to rattling.

Charity followed Joe down the steps, her gaze darting in every direction. "What's that smell? It's like rotten eggs."

"Smells like sulfur."

It hung heavily in the air, catching in the back of her throat. She coughed hard then flinched when a flash of white lightning flickered dangerously close to the windows.

She knew something awful was about to happen. She could sense it. Dread had dogged her steps all day, but she had thought it was because of her coming nuptials. She realized now that it had been something else entirely.

Before Pastor Thompson could reach the outer door to the hallway beyond, a loud, crash of thunder buckled the ground. Terrazzo's erupted from the floor like a spray of volcanic ash. Great clouds of smoke spilled from the empty crevices, setting everyone in the room screaming. Everyone stampeded for the door, ignoring the pleas of assistance that came from anyone unfortunate enough to have fallen.

Thunder boomed like a bomb blast and with it, what Charity had feared would happen, finally did. The windows exploded in and a shower of glass, bits of metal, and molding rained down on them. The wind blew through the shattered windows with such force that anything in the church not secured was whipped free and sent flying. Papers flapped around the chapel like birds in flight and the sacred candles of prayer lay scattered on the floor.

Behind the altar, the cross shook. As Charity watched, the heavy pewter cross rocked forward, dragging the nails that secured it to the wall loose.

"Open the door," someone was demanding.

"It's locked," said the pastor.

"Help us!"

"Down," Uncle Joe said as he pulled Charity and her mother to a wall opposite the altar. It was far from the basement door, but Charity had to agree that their chances were much better away from the frantic rush for the basement. "Crouch against the wall. They'll stampede us if we get near them."

Charity did as Joe said, clinging to her mother and Joe as if to a life preserver. If the appearance of an undetected hurricane on her wedding day wasn't a clear sign from God that she shouldn't marry Troy, Charity didn't know what would be.

Another sign, her horrid dress was ruined. She'd had to lift it to her knees in order to run and had accidentally ripped it.

Her hair was wild. The black ringlets hung lifeless around her waist. But she didn't care about any of that. All she wanted was to make it through the day in one piece.

"Open the door or we're all gonna die," a man who sounded a lot like Troy was screeching.

Clouds of white dust spilled from rapidly widening holes as the nails gave under the weight of the cross. One by one, more nails pulled loose. With a loud moan, the cross tore completely free of the wall. The last nails clattered to the floor just as the cross slammed into the altar, crushing it beneath its weight and reducing it and everything on it to bits.

"The devil has come for us," a woman moaned.

Charity was looking to see who had spoken when the entrance doors flew wide. Swirls of wind blew in, knocking anyone still standing in the aisle flat. The heavy oak doors smashed against the wall and splintered into a dozen pieces.

Charity stared at the entrance and nearly fell back in surprise at what she saw.

A man. A man was entering the church. The wind wound around the entrance behind him, rattling the chapel and everything in it. As he came forward, Charity saw the stranger was smiling. Not an ordinary smile, but a smile of pure, unfiltered evil.

He started down the center aisle as though this church was his personal domain. His chest was bare and dense with muscle. His ivory pants and knee boots hugged every inch of taut muscle on his body.

He strolled in, his long white hair whipping around his face. It was lit with silver sparks of light that gave him an ethereal quality. She could tell even from a distance that whatever he was, he wasn't human. At well over six feet tall, the mere sight of him was enough to intimidate someone more courageous than she was.

And he was coming down the aisle toward their little trio.

"It's a devil!" Troy's mother screamed.

In response, the man thrust his hands overhead. Around him, the pews flew into the air. Row after row flew high to the ceiling as he came on, only to crash to the floor behind him, sending splinters of wood flying in every direction. Every crash reverberated through the chapel, making Charity cringe. What kind of being was this that he could control matter without touching it? And what kind of being would arbitrarily cause such destruction within a church?

In the aisles, people were getting to their feet and squeezing against the far wall, hoping to find safety.

Charity thought her ex-future-mother-in-law might be right. Maybe the creature was a devil.

As he advanced deeper into the chapel people tried to scramble out of his way. His right hand went up suddenly, and any unfortunate unable to move out of his path fast enough was jettisoned into the air and sent flying across the church. Five wedding guests

were thrust into the wall. Looking like rag dolls dressed in Sunday finery, they crumpled to the floor in a heap. The horrid sound of bones cracking on impact would haunt Charity forever.

And he hadn't even touched them. He didn't have to touch them.

She knew she should run, knew she should escape, but where to? The outer door was locked, and the creature was blocking the only other exit. They were trapped.

"Joanne."

At the sound of her mother's name, Charity stiffened. She turned to look at her mother. "He said your name." But her mother was beyond speech. Joanne stood still, staring in horror at the approaching devil. Her hands were shaking, tears had pooled in her eyes, and her lips quivered.

"The devil calls Charity's mother," someone was saying.

The beast levitated over the crushed altar and fallen cross. When he landed, he glared at Joanne.

Charity took a step back, dragging her mother with her.

"Joanne," he said again. The voice was low, confident. And though his lips didn't move once, the word filled the chapel.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Joanne chanted.

"I've come for your child."

Joe stepped in front of Charity and her mother, as though he could protect them from such a beast.

"Uncle Joe, don't," Charity called. But it was too late. As a man would swat a fly, this thing in white lifted a hand and sent Uncle Joe rocketing into the wall. He landed with a thud and lay on the floor, unmoving.

Freed from her paralysis, Joanne ran to him.

"He's come for Charity," someone was saying.

"Well, let him have her."

That was when Charity realized her peril. He was here for her. The giant had come for her. But why? What had she done?

He advanced on her slowly, and she backpedaled until she was standing flush against the wall. She wanted to disappear, was desperate to escape. He came on, though, leering at her, his smile growing with every step. She wanted to scream, but her throat had constricted. He came forward until not a hair divided them.

Fear so complete, so all encompassing it filled every particle of her being, took hold of her.

She stared up into a face that looked human, but clearly was something else. From the well-formed lips pulled back into a smile to the gray eyes drinking her in, he looked like any other man. If she had seen him on the street, she would have thought him handsome. But he wasn't human, that much was clear. He was a monster.

"Charity," he said, still grinning. "I have traveled through hell to find you."

Her lips quivered as she tried unsuccessfully to speak.

He lifted a hand to her, and she shrank further against the wall. When she felt his touch, though, it was gentle. It was like sparks of electricity lighting across her skin.

A current of electric heat swept through her body, awakening desires she'd

ignored and suppressed for years.

"I am not the devil. I've come to take you with me. I came to prevent this." He flicked a hand out toward the chapel. "You were meant for better things, Charity."

He gazed down at her, his eyes softening until he looked the picture of love. His smile was gone, replaced with full, pouty lips parted just enough for her to see the pink of his tongue. Had she imagined that horrid grin? Had he looked like this the entire time? Like a beautiful angel fallen from the sky?

"Yes, that's what I am, Charity, an angel."

"Don't listen to him, Charity. He's a liar."

Charity glanced at her mother, who was rising to her feet.

"No," Azriel whispered, bending low so he could speak into her ear. "You've always known you were meant for something special." His lips tickled the sensitive flesh of her ear as he spoke. When he passed his tongue lightly over the delicate skin, her breath caught in her throat. "I have wonders to show you Charity. All you have to do is come with me."

She felt an erotic stirring deep within when he trailed a path down her throat with the tip of his finger. Unbidden, an image of her body crushed beneath his danced across her mind. In it, he moved within her, thrusting as she held him close. The movements were so slow, so good, she thought she'd lose her mind from the pleasure.

"Yes," he said. "That and more."

Joanne appeared beside them, her face contorted in rage. "You devil, get away from my daughter."

Thunder boomed. The last remaining window shattered, causing screams throughout the church.

Golden sunlight spilled within, but the sunshine barely registered with Charity because the white angel was suddenly careening backward through the air.

He landed hard amid the smashed pews and lay still, like a broken doll. One leg curved over the wooden back of a pew while another was twisted at an awkward angle. His mass of white hair was wild on his head, covering his face so completely she couldn't even see if his eyes were open or shut.

Charity was running forward before she realized what she was doing, her only thought to help him. She'd brushed her mother's constraining hand away and ignored her pleas for Charity to come back. She was running down the aisle and thanking God when she saw the white angel was moving. Then she saw something that turned her blood to ice. A nightmare creature appeared in a window and peered in. Thick black hair hung wildly on its head, and it clutched at the side of the wall with blackened nails that looked more like talons. While she watched, too stunned to do anything else, the creature stepped into the opening and leapt forward. She couldn't tell if it was dressed in black or if the shiny, snake-like covering was its skin. But as it allowed itself to freefall to the floor, its arms held out, she suddenly didn't care so much about what its skin looked like. A pair of wings unfolded out of its back. They were the deep sable hue of raven's wings, and as they spread and began to flap, it flew through the church to the fallen angel, who was just struggling to his feet.

Behind her, someone was praying.

Charity watched the horrid creature lower himself before the angel. She couldn't see its face, but knew the two were enemies when the angel rose to his full height and sneered. As he stood, the angel's teeth grew to deadly sharp points. His hair lit with electricity, and a gale of wind began to build around him. The black creature took a cautious step back then lifted a hand. The simple action slammed the angel into a wall. Clouds of dust flew in every direction, powdering his white hair. He let loose with a screech of absolute rage and started forward at a run.

The creature lifted another hand that sent the angel tumbling.

Somebody had to help him. Clearly this winged creature was moving against the angel with intent to kill.

The angel lay flat on his back, unmoving, but only for a moment. He got to his feet so fast, Charity found herself taking a step back. He was stalking toward her, his eyes flashing fury. She didn't know why he was looking at her until she felt an arm close around her waist.

She screamed and kicked, knowing at once it couldn't be the angel holding her, since he was running in her direction. One glance at the shiny, snake-like arm about her was enough to tell her she was in the creature's grasp. She thanked God she couldn't feel its touch through her gown. She thought if she had to feel that slimy skin pressed against her own that she might die.

As it tightened its hold she doubled her efforts to escape. Kicking like a madwoman and screaming for the angel to help her, she realized the creature's feathery wings had begun to flap.

Her mother ran toward her, screaming, and even Troy stared on, horrified.

She gasped as the floor receded beneath her feet, and the creature repositioned her to rest against its chest.

The floor fell away, the people staring up at her, then they were through the window. They flew from the church and were swallowed up in the bright sunlight.

## Chapter Three

The city buildings passed beneath her in a haze. She clung to the creature, knowing it was either that or plunge to her death.

They were picking up speed, moving faster. She tightened her grip around his neck. She refused to fall to her death. She would not give the horrid beast the satisfaction. But she couldn't look down anymore. Shouldn't. If she did, she might go a little crazy. She was flying through the air, not in a plane, but in the arms of the spawn of Satan.

She cleared her throat and strove for calm. "I suppose you're taking me...." Her voice broke. "I don't want to go there." She couldn't say the place. Couldn't even think it. How could she contemplate the fact that soon she would be taken deep beneath the earth to the fiery pits of despair that was the destination of all sinners? Was she a sinner, too? Was this her punishment for thinking lascivious thoughts about an angel? "I couldn't help it," she said, deciding to fess up and make him understand. "I knew I shouldn't think such thoughts of an angel, but he positively drove me to them."

The creature responded with a deep, disapproving grunt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that an angel would purposefully drive anybody to think sinful thoughts. I know they're incapable of that. But you have to admit that for an angel, he had one heck of a body. I'm only human!"

It grunted again.

"Oh, gosh, I'm not doing a very good job, am I?"

Without warning, it let go of her. She dangled free in the air, kept from plummeting to the earth by her hold around its neck.

She screamed and fought to wrap her legs around the thing's waist. As she hung suspended, struggling to keep her grip, it closed his hands over her wrists and pulled her free of him. She howled as it lowered her beneath his body so she was swinging free in the air. Its grip on her wrists was tight, but she knew all it had to do was let go and that would be it for her.

"Speak one more word," it said in a voice so deep it rattled inside her chest, "and I will let go of you. You will fall into the ocean and drown."

Wide-eyed, she stared down and saw they were indeed over a wide body of water. In every direction she looked, she saw nothing but water. Water everywhere and she didn't know how to swim. Were they over the Atlantic? She looked up into its wild hair and wished she could see its face. Its eyes, its mouth, anything. "Not another word," she promised.

It pulled her up and settled her against its chest. She was more than happy to close her arms around its neck and burrow into its warmth. It didn't protest when she wrapped her legs around its waist, but closed its arms around her and picked up speed again.

\* \* \* \*

She woke slowly, rubbing her eyes and stretching like a cat. Yawning, she opened her eyes. Someone had put a goose down comforter over her while she slept. It was so warm she wanted to burrow in and close her eyes again. But she knew she couldn't, she was getting married today.

She sat bolt upright. Where was she? Better question, where were her clothes? Why was she naked? How on earth had she become naked?

She was about to leap from the bed, but thought better of it. Instead, she scanned her surroundings.

She was in a large, rather dark room, lit only by the flickering glow of candles. The massive canopy bed she lay in was piled with comforters, the mattress beneath her bare flesh, soft. A filmy material hung from the posts like netting, enclosing her in a cocoon of blackness broken by the candlelight of four candles set in deep wall recesses around the room. Across from her, a fire blazed in a fireplace large enough to heat her entire apartment. The warmth of it filled the room with delicious heat. There were two windows on the wall to the left of the bed, and both were hung with heavy velvet curtains that were so bulky, she couldn't tell whether it was night or day.

She was alone, though. She could see that much. She was alone, and she had to get out of there.

She pushed the netting aside and placed a toe cautiously against the stone tiles. In reflex, she jerked her foot back as the cold of the floor bit into her bare skin. After a moment, though, when no other options came to mind, she got to her feet and tiptoed across the room to the window closest her. The red velvet curtains pooled onto the floor, but she kicked them aside and pulled them wide, only mildly registering how soft the material felt beneath her touch.

Stars glittered in the heavens above, and the silvery light of a full moon lit the night. She could see that she was up a ways from the ground. But more disturbing were the gray turrets that sat like bookends at either end of the building, though building was not quite the appropriate word. Everything about this place, from the cracked stone masonry to the murky water lying crescent-like beyond the far gates, spoke of ages past. Either she was losing her mind, or she was in a castle. The countryside spread out like a vast and desolate plain. For miles beyond her window the land was barren. Far off in the distance, though, she thought she could see the tops of trees. This castle was probably the only habitation for miles.

Was she in Europe or further east? Where had the horrid creature taken her? Clearly she wasn't beneath the earth, but she wasn't in Baltimore either.

Her prospects were grim.

"Dorothy," she said to herself, "you're not in Kansas anymore."

She heard the door open and quiet footsteps sound on the floor. She leapt for the bed and was pulling the comforter over her naked body when a figure came into view.

"Ah, so you're awake," he said.

Then she saw his face.

Her mouth went dry. She had never, in all of her days, seen such a man. Not even the angel could compare to this man's beauty. And it was beauty. He was, in fact magnificent. If not for his squared chin, he would have been too pretty to be a man.

His hair was black as midnight, pulled neatly away from his face and braided in a single plait that ran the length of his back. Large, dark eyes watched her. He seemed content to wait for her to have her fill of him. And she did. She took in his full lips, quirked ever so slightly into a smile, and the confident way he held himself. As he



moved, hands folded behind his back, all of the muscles in his legs flexed. He had an athletic build, and walked across the floor smoothly with movements that belied his size. He must have been as tall as the white angel. His olive skin was as blemish-free, as flawless in its perfection as a baby's.

Who on earth was this man, she wondered?

"There is much to be done," he said.

She tucked her knees under her chin and pulled the covers tightly about her throat, feeling her nakedness now more than she had when she'd been alone.

He advanced, and she burrowed deeper into the quilts. "Who are you? And where am I? Where's my mother? And what happened to the angel and the devil? Are you the beast's minion?"

He came to stand next to the bed. Folding his arms over his chest, he gazed at her.

She stared back, but it was like gazing into a great abyss. It wasn't that his eyes were empty. Rather, it seemed they had seen too much. They were too telling, too full of sorrow.

She looked away and tightened her grip on the comforter.

"Perhaps I should have let you fall into the Great Ocean. Come. Rise. All will be answered later."

He reached for her, and she recoiled. The glossy, black, snakeskin flesh of his hand hovered inches from her face. It was dark as pitch and glimmered under the candlelight. It was as unnatural and foreign as anything she had ever seen.

"You are the devil," she gasped. Then all was dark.

\* \* \* \*

He gazed down at the unconscious female and found, much to his surprise, that he was working to quell a smile. She was a surprisingly amusing creature, for a human. The way she insisted on referring to that white menace as an angel and him as the devil should have annoyed him. In truth, he found every word that fell from those rosy lips made him want to smile. He couldn't explain it.

She'd looked luscious in that horrid white wedding frock he'd found her in, with her breasts straining against the flimsy bodice. Hers was not a face to sail ships, it was a face to sail fleets. With her mass of dark hair, rounded buttocks, and large eyes she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. It would be his luck to be cursed to spend days with a beauty he couldn't touch.

He had a desire to rouse her from her faint with kisses. He wanted to cover her body with them. From her breasts to the tips of her toes he would cover her, until she was panting with a desire that matched his own. Only then would he sheath himself deep within her warmth. He'd ride her all night long if he could. Gently, at first. He had a sense she wouldn't be the most experienced of lovers, but as her body grew accustomed to his he would intensify their joining, ride her hard until she was begging for more.

He moaned aloud. He had to get a grip on himself. What he was here to do was too important to lose himself in lust for a second time. This was his second chance, and he couldn't mess it up. He had to get her to Alaric's house. There was so much he had to tell her and so little time. First, he would give her a brief history of events, then he would get in contact with The Alliance. Alaric had a hideaway nearby. That had been his only

reason for coming here. He would tell Charity about Azriel, find Alaric and convince Alaric of who he, Raven, was. As Michael had said, Alaric would know how to get in contact with Figlio.

Charity moaned in her sleep. When Raven glanced at her, he saw she had rolled free of the covers. Her naked body shimmered in the firelight. The round moons of her buttocks tormented him as she shifted to her stomach. He felt a familiar stirring begin between his legs and slowly spread. It had been so long since he'd had a woman. Too long, and he wanted this one.

He moved closer to the bed.

Her lips were parted and he could see the hint of a tongue. He wanted to suck it. Instead, he slid a hand under the waistband of his pants and wrapped his fingers around his stiff cock, pleased that after all this time he hadn't lost the ability to get an erection. He gave himself a squeeze meant to dispel the arousal, but as luck would have it all he managed to do was heighten it.

With a groan of surrender, he stepped out of his snakeskin pants and pulled off his shirt and gloves. The shirt was a delicate process, since it wasn't made with wing flaps in mind. But he freed himself of the constricting material and sighed in relief as the warmth of the room enveloped his naked body. He wasn't surprised to see his engorged cock was standing at full attention.

He spread his wings to their full width. The upper pair spanned eight feet, while the lower pair fell just short of that. The black fur gleamed as it had before his imprisonment.

Knowing well the impressive picture he made, he smiled to himself and eased onto the bed beside her. He pulled in his wings, promising himself he'd only lay with her.

## Chapter Four

She woke slowly, gradually becoming aware of the taste of something sweet in her mouth. She moaned. Her tongue was alive with the taste of merlot and strawberries. Though she tried to swallow she couldn't manage it. Her disorientation was too strong to do much but lay there wondering what was going on. She was on her back and found it difficult to move. It was as if a weight had been laid across her body, pinning her to the bed.

"You taste better than I imagined."

The voice was masculine, deep, with just a hint of an indiscernible accent.

That voice, compelling as it was, could only belong to one person. And those soft lips had to have the same origin. The devil. The horrid, beautiful, snakeskin demon was kissing her. Even as she struggled for words, she felt her will to fight evaporate under his erotic assault. He nipped her lips with his teeth, letting his tongue brush along the puffy edges of her lips while he murmured what seemed sweet endearments to her in a language she couldn't understand. He was honey and wine and every good thing she'd ever tasted.

And he was the embodiment of evil.

She opened her eyes.

Heavily muscled biceps caged her while a body worthy of the finest work of art lay against her own, keeping her pressed firmly into the mattress. One glance at his impressive frame told her she wouldn't be able to budge him if she tried.

Her sudden realization of how helpless she truly was, how completely at his mercy she was, had her burning with a desire unlike anything she'd ever felt. He had brought her to this castle, had ripped her from her wedding and taken her to this place where they would be alone.

All of her feminist assertions were swiftly forgotten as a yearning so intense, a need she hadn't even known she had, utterly overwhelmed her.

He grinned. Cupping the back of her head with one large hand, he brought his mouth down hungrily on hers, preventing her from saying anything. He worked his tongue into her mouth and feasted. The kiss was deep, slow, delicious, and so good she was wrapping her arms around him before she'd realized what she was doing. No man had ever kissed her this way. Definitely not Troy.

His free hand went to her breasts, plucking at her engorged nipples and squeezing. The delicious sensation of being desired by such a man made breathing hard. She had to fight to catch her breath. He played with the sensitive flesh, tormented it until her breathing was hot and labored.

"Oh, yes," she moaned. *No, no, no*, her mind begged. *He's evil. You cannot do these things with him.* But she wanted to. He was making her feel so good. No one had ever made her feel like this.

She struggled to clear her mind. Desperate to escape him, she clung to the image of him swooping into the church and sending the white angel careening into walls. Only a monster would be capable of such monstrous acts. Only a monster would destroy a

church. Only a monster had skin like a snake. Only a monster could make her body want so badly to defy her mind.

She turned away from him.

He would have none of it, though. His lips brushed her cheek, and he drew his tongue over her skin so tenderly that small frissons of pleasure ran up and down her spine. Then he nipped her. First her cheek, then her jaw line, then she felt the smallest pain on her throat as he closed his teeth over her carotid and sucked. The pain was brief, quickly replaced with his lush kisses. He made a slow trail over her throat, across her collarbone, and over the mounds of her breasts.

She didn't know what to do or what to think. Nobody had ever done this to her. He kissed her as though he had all the time in the world to enjoy her. She couldn't help but respond. Try as she might to quell her body's reaction to his touch, she found she could do little to keep from arching toward him.

He was ambrosia. Fine wine made just for her. She met his every kiss with one of her own, arching to meet his lips, starving for the taste of him. Even as she reveled in the sweet decadence, her mind raged against what she was allowing him to do.

He tugged at her nipples, his breaths coming faster and hotter against her skin. He teased her. When he closed his mouth over her nipple she let out a tiny mew of surprise. He growled deep in his throat as he laved the pert bud with the tip of his tongue.

"Please," she pleaded.

He raised himself to his elbows and stared down at her.

Again, Charity was struck by how beautiful he was. How perfect. She knew she should be afraid of him, knew even then the chances of him being some sort of demon was good, but she couldn't generate any real fear of him. She didn't sense he meant her any harm. It was passion with him, and lust and desire.

"You are mine for the taking," he said in a soft whisper that she couldn't deny. Didn't try. "Mine," he whispered, then closed his mouth over hers.

Fiery heat gripped her, and she writhed beneath him, welcoming his kiss with her own. Her rapid inhalations forced her breasts up and into his chest. Suddenly she was desperate to feel his hands on them again.

She released an uneven sigh when he eased a hand between her thighs. His searching fingers slipped easily over the moistened flesh. When he found her clitoris, she let loose a moan. Sparks of pleasure shot through her body like streaks of electricity. He squeezed the nub between his finger and thumb, then made gentle circles over it. Her head rocked back and forth as the last threads of control left her.

His tongue dipped deeply into her mouth possessively as the orgasm broke over her body. It spread like wild fire and pummeled her. She moaned like the most wanton of whores and spread her legs wider for him. She had to feel him inside of her. Feel what he could do to her with the thick erection pressing into her thigh.

Had she ever found him repulsive? What craziness had that been? Gone was the savage beast she had seen in the church, gone even was the snakeskin. His olive skin rippled over perfectly defined muscles.

"Please, yes," she stammered. "Take me now."

\* \* \* \*

Raven knew he could have her. She was his to take if he chose. And so wet. So ready for him. He could ease inside of her and be in bliss within seconds. It had been so long since he'd experienced that most natural of human experiences. Too long. And he wanted to experience it with Charity. But he couldn't. It was too dangerous to even consider. He was a fool for tempting himself this much. This was a delicate mission, and one misstep could ruin everything. He had to proceed with care. She didn't know what he was. For that matter, she didn't even know what she was, why she was here, or what part she had to play in things. And there was Figlio who she truly belonged to ... according to Michael.

He withdrew his hand from her and eased back on his heels.

"What?"

He panted with the effort of control. "I am sorry. Now is not the time for such diversions."

\* \* \* \*

She felt faint. She was heady with desire. He was kneeling between her legs and speaking in a low voice that resonated deep inside of her. But that wasn't what had her sitting up in the bed and staring at him. What tormented her was the way he stroked his erect cock as he spoke. He palmed it in one hand that he ran expertly over the shaft. Up and down he stroked, contradicting his words.

"Please," she said, even as her face heated with embarrassment.

"I want you to rest. When you wake again, we will talk."

He crawled forward then, pinning her to the bed and pressing her against the satiny pillows.

Her heart quickened.

"I don't want to sleep. I want you to ...."

"Sleep," he ordered against her ear. "I will be here when you wake."

Inexplicably, she felt the unwelcome tug of fatigue. Her eyes grew heavy, and suddenly she thought maybe sleep wasn't such a bad idea.

She closed her eyes.

## Chapter Five

She woke slowly. This time, she didn't harbor any misconception that she was home on the morning of her wedding. The fur coverlet draped over her was testimony enough that she was far from home.

She lay still while the desire to hide deep beneath the silken fur gradually dissipated. She remembered what had preceded this last rest, and her face heated with humiliation at the thought of her wanton behavior. She didn't even know him, yet she'd offered herself up on a silver platter. What of diseases and pregnancy? She hadn't considered any of those things. What on earth had she been thinking? This morning, or was it yesterday when she'd practically thrown herself at the white angel? Tonight she was making out with a devil. She really had to get herself in hand.

"Are you ready to talk?"

She nearly hopped out of the bed. The only thing that kept her in place was her nakedness. Instead of running, she struggled to an upright position and stared open-mouthed at the man beside her. He lay casually, as if he'd slept with her a million times before. His hair, loosened from its plait, spilled across the pillow beside her like black satin, and one very muscular, very naked leg was propped up just beyond the fall of the fur coverlet. She noted again how normal his skin seemed, how human. No snakeskin.

"You're still here," she said finally.

In response, he sat up and rolled toward the bedside table at his left and lifted a crystal decanter. Crimson liquid sloshed when he repositioned himself in the bed. "Of course," he said. He raised one of two goblets off of the table and emptied a copious amount of the crimson fluid into it.

"I must apologize for my earlier behavior. Please understand that it's been a long while since I looked upon a woman. When I saw you naked under the glow of the candlelight .... Let's say I lost my self-control and leave it at that. I assure you, it will not happen again. Cream sherry?"

"No, thank you." She pushed the glass away.

"A restorative. You'll need it."

His little apology, though well meant, annoyed her. He was apologizing for giving her what had been her most erotic experience to date and promising never to do it again. To her great shame, she wanted him to do it again, no matter what he was. Though he was right to stop them from going any further than they had earlier, she thought he should leave the option for future erotic encounters open. "Where am I?"

"Prague."

She forced herself to stay calm. "You have wings, don't you, and you flew across the ocean with me?"

"So you do remember." He held the glass out to her a second time. "Please."

She took the glass and gave the fluid a cautious sniff. It smelled like sherry. It even had the syrupy texture of cream sherry. Raising the glass to her lips, she swallowed a mouthful. The liquid slid down her throat, leaving a pleasant burn in its wake. It was sweet and made her feel hot all over. She upended the glass, swallowing as quickly as she

could. "More," she demanded.

He complied.

When she was working on her third glass, he settled back into the pillows and rested his arm across his propped up knee. "Are you hungry?"

She realized quite suddenly that she was hungry. Famished, to put a finer point on it. "Yes."

Again he turned to the bedside table. This time, he lifted a phone and began punching in numbers. "Dobry vecer. Ano," he said into the phone.

He'd called room service. Okay, so now she knew she was in a hotel in Prague. Not just any hotel though, from the looks of it, it had to be five-star all the way. Everything was too fine, too expensive. For crying out loud, the hotel was housed in a castle.

So she knew she was in a hotel in Prague, and had been brought here by a man-thing with wings.

"Are you ready to talk now?"

He'd set the phone down and turned to face her.

She nodded. "First tell me who or what you are, and if you plan to sacrifice me or something. I think I have the right to know if my mortality is in peril."

"I am Raven." He bowed over her hand. He'd had to tug it from the coverlet to free it, but when he had, he placed a lingering kiss in her palm. His lips were moist and soft against her skin. From head to toe she tingled. And all the while, those sable eyes were heavy on her, making her face heat again. "And you are Charity. Charity, which is love, as the Bible says."

He was like something out of a fantasy. "Charity," she repeated dreamily, then wanted to kick herself. This was precisely why she'd never gotten a date in high school. She was constantly saying stupid things.

"I am one of the Grigori." He considered this. "One of the watchers, the fallen angels spoken of in old."

"Angel? As in heaven?"

He held up a hand. "Please, don't interrupt. If you have any questions, I'll address them when I've finished. I have too much to say and too little time to say it. Already, he moves against us. We must get on the road soon."

"What's going on?"

He repositioned himself in the bed. The movement shifted the coverlet so it fell almost entirely free of him. Nipples the color of red wine were suddenly visible, as was much of his very muscular right thigh.

She caught her breath at the sight.

Soft curls of hair made a path over his chiseled abdomen and down under the fur, where the only part of his body still covered lay. As her mouth filled with saliva, she registered the slightest desire to pull the covers away and feast her eyes on the rest of him.

"Don't interrupt," he was saying. "When I say fallen angel I don't mean fallen from the war between God and Lucifer. I fought on the side of God in that battle and was well pleased when we were the victors. If I had the choice to make again, I wouldn't

change my decision to fight. My fall from grace happened some time after that." He caught the path her eyes were burning through the air and paused. "Would you prefer it if I removed...?"

"No!"

"I thought it would be distracting for you to listen to me if I wasn't covered in some way." He gave her a grin that made her toes curl. "Lust!" he declared.

A guilty flush had her looking away from him and sipping more sherry.

"It's why I fell from grace," he explained. "Let's start at the beginning, shall we. As a Watcher, my sole duty was to look over humans. Watchers were the shepherds of old, providing gentle guidance for God's new creation. But over time our chief and leader, Samyaza, grew weary of watching over humans. He began to lust after them and for what they had. Basically, he wanted to have sex with them. But he was also seduced by the allure of having offspring as men have offspring. The appeal proved to be too much of a temptation for him.

"Samyaza knew what he wanted to do was forbidden. He decided that instead of defying God alone, he would convince the rest of us to join him. I can still remember how he'd go on and on about the beauty of humans and how he longed for the feel of warm flesh beneath his hands. He seduced us slowly, making us watch humans as they had sex. We watched, our curiosity growing with every climax. The sight of those writhing bodies, the sound of human moans of pleasure ... it was intoxicating. Before long he'd convinced all hundred and ninety-nine of us to descend into sin with him. "

"It was that easy? You could be a caretaker of humans one minute and sleeping with them the next?"

"Of course. Taking on a human form was something we did regularly in our capacity as Watchers. All we had to do was chose a form that was pleasing to the eye."

"So what happened?"

"Things were fine for a while. All of us reveled in the delights of the flesh, but eventually there were a few who decided sex wasn't enough. Feeling the sweetness of soft thighs wrapped about your waist while you move slowly, inexorably to that final bliss wasn't enough. Some went further."

He paused here and looked at her. She assumed he was making certain he still had her attention. He did. She returned his stare, and nodded for him to continue.

"Listen closely, Charity, because the things I'm telling you are not known. They have been hidden from men for millennia. Of course, there are a few men who know of the things I speak, rare men. Understand that I am imparting to you a great mystery." She nodded again, and he went on. "All of the things you feared when you were young, all of the creatures you were told aren't real ... are."

She stared at him. She wanted to think he was crazy but she couldn't. Already she'd seen too much to doubt him. "What kind of creatures are we talking about?"

"Vampires, werewolves, demons, all of them are real. I'll begin with were-creatures.

"I believe I was saying that many of our number weren't content to enjoy sex with women. Some of us fell so low as to sleep with animals. Wolves, tigers, horses, even sheep."



She grimaced. "But why?"

"I couldn't say. The point is that as often happens when a male lay with a female, these female beasts became pregnant. The resulting offspring were half-Watcher, half-animal beasts. Take a wolf/Watcher child. With the angelic blood infused in them, some had the ability to shape shift between human, spirit, and wolf form at will, just like we could. Others were born horrible humanoid/wolf hybrids without the ability to shape shift at all. All of these creatures, all of these crossbreeds are what we call beastmen.

"Matters worsened when even the human females failed to give birth to normal babies. The first sign of trouble was the abridged gestation period. Nine months became three days. And when they gave birth the babies were half human and half watcher. They grew at a rapid rate as well. In one month's time they were the size of an average human. In full adulthood they were larger than normal humans, towering a full head over them. Rare was the occasion that a woman gave birth to a normal baby. But the most important thing to remember here is that all of these creatures were born out of the will of God. The offspring of the women were half-human, but with unnatural spirits in them. Do you see the problem?"

She didn't and told him as much.

"All of us are created to worship God, so there's an inherent hunger in us to be close to our Creator. It's like a spark of light in us that's constantly burning."

"I've never seen a serial killer that looked like he wanted to get closer to God."

"All men and all angels were created to worship God. All of us, Charity. Usually this is a good thing because God is present in us. But for those who don't have that union with God, those whose connection has been severed, all that's left is our insatiable hunger for that light. For the Watchers, when we turned from God's will and sinned against him we lost our connection."

"What about your offspring?"

Raven settled back into the pillows and looked away from her. For a few seconds he held a hand before his face and seemed to be studying it as though it were something new. "They never had a chance," he said finally.

"What happened to them?"

"Merciful God," he sneered, snatching up the decanter and pouring himself a drink. "In His divine arrogance, He's created all of us to worship Him. To hunger for Him. For our offspring, it wasn't any different. But because they came from us, from Watchers, He turned His divine back on them as thoroughly as though they were the ones who had sinned against him. Punish me, it was my choice, but don't punish them."

"So what happened?" she asked again.

"The hunger was still there, Charity. That inner need to be close to the Creator was there, but there was no light in them." He turned to face her then, his eyes dark with rage. "He had to know what would happen. It's His own fault."

"What happened?"

"We all hunger for the light, Charity. When it's taken away from us, we get at it any way we can."

She swallowed hard as the realization of what he was saying dawned.

"Do you know what happens to an angel when he leaves the light of God?"

She didn't like the way this conversation was going at all. Why did they have to talk anyway? Why couldn't they just lie in the bed and make out? She didn't want to think of fallen angels. Years of parochial school had taught her more than she'd ever wanted to know about evil. Nevertheless, she heard the words slip from her mouth in a shaky voice that didn't sound anything like her own. "They become demons." At his nod, she brought her knees up under her chin and buried her face in her free hand. She had to ask the next question, though there was nothing in her that wanted to. "And you are...?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a fallen angel."

She glanced at him. "Aren't demons supposed to be ugly?"

"Some are."

"And your offspring?"

"Grigori offspring vary. It depends. Most look human, but they have the spirits of demons inside of them. Spirits whose hunger for God will never be filled. The God who turned His back on them and still resides in men. The closest our offspring can get to the oneness with God they seek, to that peace humans take for granted, is through men."

"Why are you telling me this?" she suddenly demanded.

"Because you need to know."

"But I don't want to know. Take me back. Take me home. I don't want to hear any more." Like a child, she clamped her hands over her ears.

"I can't do that, Charity."

She wanted to get to her feet, wanted to run away from him but her bare body kept her beneath the covers. That, and the fact that she doubted her legs would hold her if she tried to stand. "You're telling me about vampires, aren't you? Vampires and werewolves ...."

"The latter are called beastmen," he corrected. "Vampires are part human, but originally beastmen weren't. Some looked human, but they were made from ...."

"I know! From fallen angels and animals. This is crazy talk. Can't you see this is crazy talk? What the hell do I have to do with any of this? I work at a bank. I have a one bedroom apartment in Canton. This isn't my life."

"Irrelevant."

"If all of this actually happened, why wouldn't someone step in, an angel or someone?"

Raven shrugged. "You would think that the sight of our offspring gorging themselves on human blood would have humbled us, but it didn't. It was quite the sport, actually. Seeing God's beloved creation reduced to the status of food. And soon, even this abomination wasn't enough. Azriel, a Watcher whose goodness had all but vanished in his years on the earth, took it upon himself to recruit six Watchers to teach sorcery to men. The seven Watchers told men that by learning special incantations they could control the vampires and beastmen and dominate them.

"We were all so callous, Charity. As if it meant nothing for those seven to teach men the mysteries of heaven. Such a thing should never have been done. Azriel was the cause of Father's greatest wrath."

A gentle knock at the door made Charity jump.

"Room service," Raven explained. Pushing the netting aside, he rose from the

bed.

As he stood, the fur coverlet slipped from her. Dazed, she realized the fur coverlet wasn't a coverlet at all, but him. He'd wrapped her in his wings. They were soft and furry and black as the night, and as she watched, they folded in on themselves in the manner of a hand fan. In the time it took him to stride from the bed to the armoire where a robe hung on a brass hook, the wings folded into small flaps that fit easily under the fur-lined robe. He disappeared into a small foyer and reappeared moments later, pushing a fine cart with heaps of food atop it into the room.

"I didn't think," he began, "you would want the waiter to see you in your present state of undress."

She set her arms over her breasts in a feeble attempt to shield her nakedness from him. He had, after all, seen much more than her breasts. "Thank you."

Though she was still reeling from her conversation, her stomach tightened as she took in the salmon filets, thin strips of smoked salmon and capers, the massive bowls of homemade mashed potatoes with fine porcelain pitchers of gravy, butter-steamed broccoli, and fluffy mounds of wild rice. There were two plates piled high with slices of baked ham, an entire turkey, and separate bowls for the boiled potatoes, roasted carrots, and a massive casserole of something Raven referred to as Mutton Stew. The name didn't sound very appealing, but the aroma of lamb, onions, parsley, and potatoes was intoxicating. Billows of steam rose from the delicious offering, and she salivated despite her ire. It was enough food to feed a small army. The crème de la crème were three bottles of red wine, four bottles of white wine, and two great pitchers of ale.

She was so hungry she could have drunk the wine straight from the bottle and eaten with her fingers.

"So much food," she said.

"I'm very hungry." He dipped a finger into the mashed potatoes and slowly drew it out. Puffs of fluffy, white potato clung to it. As if his aim was to torment her, he sucked his finger into his mouth, moaning in ecstasy, before drawing it free of his lips. "I'd forgotten how good food is. Have some." Again, his finger disappeared into the mound of potatoes and came free covered in white fluff. "Come here."

"You scare the hell out of me then try to ply me with food?" she protested. "No thank you. I want to go home."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"You haven't eaten in hours. You must be hungry."

"I'm not, though," she lied.

"Come here, or I'll come get you." He paused to gaze into her eyes. "But you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Under the circumstances, she thought the lascivious grin he was wearing was highly inappropriate.

"No, I wouldn't."

The grin widened to a smile. "Yes, you would. I don't even have to read your mind to see that. You wear your thoughts ...."

"You can read my mind?" She drew the covers up around her body as though that

would protect her thoughts from him.

"I'm an angel. Of course I can read your mind."

"You're a fallen angel."

"Don't try to change the subject. If you really want me...." He left the sentence unfinished.

She tried to empty her mind of all thought, terrified now that he had seen every perverted fantasy she'd had from the first moment she saw him enter this room. He wasn't helping matters, though. As she watched, stunned, he let his robe fall open.

The sight of him naked had her in a near swoon. His sable mane spilled over his shoulders as he stood, legs spread wide with the flaps of his robe hanging loose. His rosy nipples were displayed for her viewing pleasure, as was the thick thatch of hair between his legs where his cock bobbed invitingly.

"Come here or I'll come and get you."

She thought about refusing him, but that was as far as it went. If he got on the bed now there was no telling what would happen.

With the goose-down comforter wrapped about her, she crawled toward him.

She watched Raven as he watched her crawl. Watched him as the comforter slid aside to display her bare thigh. This was like playing with fire. The mere sight of her naked flesh seemed to have the blood draining from his head and engorging his steadily hardening cock until it was standing at attention and throbbing. Desire replaced her blood, and it flowed through her veins with a force that wouldn't be ignored.

She wanted him.

Charity knelt before Raven, her chest heaving.

"Good girl. Now taste."

He held his finger before her lips. She didn't stop to think. She closed her mouth over his finger and sucked in the delicious taste of mashed potatoes and creamy butter. She felt the rough edges of his skin against her tongue as she swirled her tongue along the length of it.

When he pulled his finger free of her mouth, he left behind a faint taste of butter.

"Wasn't that good?" he asked softly.

She tried to breathe calmly but was doing a lousy job of it. Even as she tried to empty her head, she marveled at how tight bands of muscle stood out beneath skin so smooth and supple she would have been happy to spend hours running her hands along the silky planes of his body. She wanted to slide her fingers under the folds of his robe and feel every muscle, every inch of skin. Surely there could be nothing wrong with touching? And if they happened to kiss once or twice, what harm could come from that? Nobody had to know.

With the tip of a finger, he tilted her face toward his.

"You are a bad girl," he admonished. "So naughty." He closed his eyes, as if giving himself strength, and stepped away from her. "You must remember what I am."

"An angel who teases."

"Just an angel."

In stark contradiction to what he'd just said, he leaned forward and closed his mouth over hers.

Heat swelled within her as his tongue filled her mouth. She moaned against his lips and strained toward him. Too soon, though, the kiss was over. He'd stood, claspng both of her wrists in one hand. "Be a good girl, now."

"Me! You're the one who started it."

"You were the one with the dirty thoughts."

"Well, stay out of my head then. What kind of thoughts did you think I'd have after you practically stripped right in front of me?"

He released her and began removing trays and dishes from the cart.

She was a big girl. It wasn't beyond her capabilities to share a room with a man, albeit the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen, and not have lustful thoughts about him. She could do this, would do this. She wasn't about to throw herself at him again.

She helped him remove trays and dishes and set them on the bed.

"So what happened?" She asked, trying to draw her mind from its present lustful musings.

"God sent the archangels to cast us from the earth while He sent a flood to wipe out our offspring. It was horrible. You cannot imagine the horror of such a thing; seeing your children die."

Surprised at how grateful she was to resume their former conversation, she said, "Back home, if it rains for three days straight people get pretty bent out of shape. I can't imagine a forty-day rain."

"Ah, but that's it. It wasn't just rain. Of course the heavens opened and rain fell, but the very earth opened up. Water poured in from everywhere. Moisture from above and below so there was nowhere to hide. Even the oceans spilled over. Our children were left to drown, and there was nothing we could do about it. We were trapped beneath the earth."

"All of them died?"

"A small number survived. Had it not been so, there wouldn't be any vampires or beastmen today. Of course, they have since passed on their curse to humans and increased their numbers. The ones who survived were the ones able to shift into their spirit form and rise above the waters. All of the others died. For the Watchers, all of us were imprisoned beneath the earth's surface save one." He held up a finger to stress the number. "Azriel was imprisoned alone because his sin was greater than ours. He was cast into outer darkness and bound hand and foot. Sharpened stones were hurled upon him, and he was to remain there forever, never to see the light again until the Day of Judgment when he would be cast into the eternal fire."

He turned to the bedside table and poured more wine into his goblet. She watched him as he gripped the stem of the glass and tipped it to his lips. His eyes closed as he swallowed and his eyelashes fluttered against his face like the wings of a black butterfly.

"And?" She prompted.

"Can't you guess what comes next? No? Okay then, I'll tell you. The Watchers were all imprisoned for many millennia. Our bindings were inescapable, or so the archangels thought. Two days ago, I was summoned from my prison to meet with my old friend, Michael. In the simplest of terms, he told me that the evil one, Azriel, had escaped and returned to the earth. And it's up to me to retrieve him." She began to speak, but he

held up a finger for her to stop. "There is one other thing." He rolled a slice of ham and folded it into his mouth. She was forced to wait patiently as he finished chewing. "I think you'll like this part. Azriel is in search of a female, half human and half Nephilim, but different from the vampires and beastmen. Like her progenitors, this female has the ability to copy the *abilities* of her sexual mates, meaning if she mates with a vampire, for a time she will take on his ability to suck blood, read minds, air walk, and whatever else he can do. If she mates with a beastman she will take on his strength and his ability to shape shift. Do you understand how dangerous such a woman would be if aligned with Azriel? There would be no end to the harm they would do."

"I don't know what a Nephilim is, but really, what harm could two people do on a world full of billions? Even two supernatural people?"

"A former Watcher and a Nephilim? I couldn't begin to calculate. But you do have some idea. You saw me in the church yesterday. You saw what I'm capable of. I could have killed every person in that building if I chose. Smashed them against the wall like so much trash with a simple thought, or brought the entire structure of the building down on them. All angels, fallen or not, can move matter with their minds. You pair someone like me with a Nephilim and there's no telling what harm we could do. But you're right when you say they would be limited. That's why Azriel is going to use the Nephilim female to locate her ancestors who were exiled to another realm nearly ten thousand years ago."

"Azriel, fallen angels, Nephilim ...." She shrugged. "It's too much. First, I don't get why Azriel would even want to come to earth. You make it sound like cops and robbers. Like he has some vendetta against man."

"God's chosen few? But of course, Charity, don't be so naïve. All the Watchers do. Why do you think we descended from heaven and took human form? Because we want what humans have and envy the pedestal Father has placed them on. Care for another drink?"

"No," she said, carefully cutting a bit of smoked salmon, "I want to know why you're telling me this. I've never heard of Azriel or Nephilim, so why kidnap me?"

He refilled her empty goblet anyway, giving her a grin that made her very uncomfortable. "You haven't figured it out yet?"

Suddenly, the room door crashed into the far wall, and the sound of footsteps echoed off the walls. Charity dove beneath the blankets and peaked out while Raven got to his feet. His wings unfolded, and he set his gaze on the foyer.

## Chapter Six

Matching red heads appeared, one male and one female. Both of the figures were unnaturally tall, both sauntered in with their heads held high, walking with a confidence Charity had never felt, and both were heading for Raven. Charity wondered if she should do something, and if so, what?

The male held a staff of twisted wood that rose nearly to his shoulders. It was thick with age and pocked. The female, green eyes glittering with what looked to Charity like malevolence, seemed dangerous. She had a large brown satchel thrown over a shoulder and was darting quick glances around the room. Though she didn't hold a staff or a weapon of any kind, she looked deadly enough without one. A cruel smile turned her lips up at the corners, and her hands were clenched into tight fists that blanched her skin.

Charity threw a quick look at Raven to see what he was making of their visitors, but his face was shielded from her by one of his wings.

"Great One," the man gasped. His voice held just the hint of a Scottish accent. To Charity's considerable surprise, the huge redheaded male nearly collapsed to his knees before Raven. The only thing keeping him level was the firm hand the female set on his forearm. "I had not thought to believe the signs. But it's true. It's really you."

Raven lowered his wings so they settled over his naked lower half and smiled.

"Old friend," Raven pronounced in solemn tones, "It is I."

"Oh, for pity's sake." The red-haired beauty threw her head back and rolled her eyes. "You are here, and we are here. We are all very happy to see each other." She hefted her male companion to his feet, then sat on the bed. The entire structure shook. "It took us two days to get here. I'm beat, and Myrddin tells me I won't have time to rest. We have to hit the road. You ask me, Alaric can very well come to us. I don't care if he doesn't know you're here, he should sense your presence. I did after all. Your phone call was completely unnecessary, Raven. I took it as an insult."

The woman could have been a supermodel had she wanted to. Her long legs were covered by simple blue jeans, and she wore a plain brown sweater. This was a woman who didn't need to spend a lot of money to look beautiful. She quite simply *was* beautiful. And her companion wasn't too bad either. A closer look at him showed his hair to be more strawberry blonde than red, and his eyes were bright jade. A sprinkling of freckles over his nose made him seem far less threatening than he had when he'd strode in, though she could sense the danger in the man in the way he held his body and the way he took in his surroundings. He couldn't be anything more than thirty-five, but he seemed far older. His eyes spoke of ages past and secrets known.

"Alicenna," the man chastised, "do you not see the relevance of this meeting? For the first time ... for the first time in our existence, Raven is before us in the flesh." He reached trembling fingers in Raven's direction. "We did not conjure him. Yet, he is here."

Raven clasped the shaking hand and held it against his bare chest. "I am real."

"Your heart ... it beats."

"His mouth ... it talks," the female said. "For crying out loud, Myrddin, what did you expect? The body is human, after all."

Raven's smile broadened when he looked past Myrddin to Aliceanna. "And you are as beautiful as ever, Aliceanna."

"Damn right. Now where's this female you told us about? I actually had to go into an American mall to find these things."

Charity, who had tucked herself into the furthest corner of the bed so as not to be noticed, watched as the female began dumping the contents of the bag she'd carried in on the floor.

A sudden, all-encompassing desire to hide rolled over Charity when she saw Raven turn to face her. She should have told him she didn't do well with people, especially strangers. He should have told her he was expecting company.

"Myrddin, Aliceanna," Raven said, stretching his arm in her direction, "this is Charity. The last human Nephilim. And Charity ...."

"What?" Charity screeched. "Nephilim ... me? Like hell."

"This is Aliceanna and Myrddin," he continued as if she hadn't spoken.

Aliceanna stared at her. From her gaping mouth and narrowed eyes, Charity guessed Aliceanna was nearly as shocked by this pronouncement as she, Charity, was. "This is the last human Nephilim? Where's the rest of her? There has to be some mistake. She's so tiny."

"No mistake," Raven said. "I had to fight Azriel to take her. He knows who she is even if you don't."

Aliceanna grimaced at the gentle reprimand.

"Well, Azriel made a mistake," Charity declared. "Wait. Who the hell is Azriel?" But she didn't have to wait for Raven to answer. She knew exactly who Azriel was. "The white angel."

"But she's so small," Aliceanna was saying. "You!" She called to Charity, "How tall are you? And how much do you weigh?"

Charity had to work her lips before any sound came out. "Five feet five."

"She's almost a foot shorter than me. How on earth can she be Nephilim? They were giants."

"Her mother is human," Myrddin said.

Raven was pulling snakeskin pants over his thighs when Charity looked at him. She sent a silent plea for help in his direction. In response, he grabbed up his boots and socks and began shoving his feet into them. "You are Nephilim, and yes, Azriel is your white angel."

This couldn't be right, Charity thought. There had to be some kind of mistake here. She wasn't Nephilim. She was human. But if it was a mistake, how could she explain the recent events of her life? The white angel swooping into the church, and his ability to move objects and people without touching them was unexplainable unless he was an angel. Raven's ability to fly her from Baltimore to Prague was also unexplainable, except that angels had wings. Clearly neither man was human. So if neither man were human, if both men were angels and both had come for her ... .

"No!" She declared to nobody in particular.

"Come here, little one," Aliceanna demanded. "I have clothes for you to wear."

Charity cleared her throat. "I can't move. I'm naked."



Aliceanna huffed. "Not one of those. It's okay honey, you ain't got nothing we ain't seen before."

"Do you have to be such a dictator?" Raven asked. "This is new to her."

"I'm not a dictator. Am I a dictator, Myrddin?"

Myrddin didn't answer immediately. Finally, he said, "You are my best student."

Raven went to the clothes on the floor and lifted the bundle. Charity saw a mass of jeans, flannel shirts, T-shirts, panties, and bras.

"Let me," Aliceanna said, taking the bundle from him. She gave Charity a measuring glance, then began leafing through the clothes. "Size eight?" she asked.

Her mind still reeling, Charity glanced down at her own body, still covered by the thick comforter. "Size five."

"Are you sure?"

"What kind of question is that? Of course I'm sure."

"You do realize I can see the outline of your body under all those covers."

"The hell you say!"

"Very well, then, size seven."

"You know good and well that's practically the same thing as a size eight. Size six."

"In your dreams. I bet you haven't seen a five/six since you were in high school."

"Of all the horrible, inconsiderate ... horrible things to say to a person!"

Aliceanna grabbed two pairs of jeans from the pile and held them up, a pair in each hand. "Size five/six and size seven/eight. Care to wager which will fit?"

"No, I don't."

"What's your shoe size?"

"Seven."

Aliceanna bent over the bed and came up with a pair of boots. She tossed them in Charity's direction then got to her feet. "Good luck."

Myrddin settled himself on the bed and set to making a plate of food. "Is the spell holding, Raven?"

"Do you see the white one?" Raven replied. "Yes, Myrddin, the protection spell you gave me is working fine." Raven settled down on the bed again. Every inch of his body was covered in snakeskin save his face, and the knee-high biker boots he wore. Seeing him dress in the snakeskin made her feel kind of silly to have thought the clothes were actually his real skin.

Raven draped a leather cloak over his shoulders. She supposed the cloak offered him more freedom of movement than a regular coat would have.

He looked phenomenal.

"Come, Charity," he called to her after she had shoved herself into her new clothes under the covers.

Fully dressed in jeans--the size fives--a brown flannel shirt and boots, she looked like a shorter, darker version of Aliceanna. Did the girl have to find clothes for Charity that were nearly an exact replica of her own?

As Charity stood, Aliceanna gave her an approving smile. "Still say the size eights would have been a better fit."

Charity walked around to the edge of the bed where Raven was sitting, knees spread. He held a brush and two black rubber bands out to her. "I need you to braid my hair," he said.

She took the implements, wrapping the bands around her wrists for easy retrieval. For a brief moment, their hands touched, making her shiver. "You tell me I'm not human, then you tell me to braid your hair."

"You're half human," Raven corrected. "And yes, I want you to braid it. Nothing fancy. I just want it out of my face."

Her legs wobbled. The way he looked at her made her hot. "Um, okay. And maybe you could tell me what exactly being a Nephilim means? I got the bit about Nephilim being able to take on the qualities of their sexual partners, but what exactly is a Nephilim?"

"Later. Right now, I want my hair braided. We have to leave. We've been here too long already."

"How long?"

"Day and a half."

She climbed onto the bed and gazed at him. His raven hair was long and as soft as spun silk. She'd never known any human with such hair as this. It hung down his back in a lush cascade. While it wasn't pin straight, neither was it curly. It was the perfect mix of both, and when she touched it, a frisson of pleasure danced up her spine.

She pulled the brush over his hair in long strokes, and he tilted his head back for her, moaning deep in his throat.

"Nice," he said.

Desire moved through her, and she bit her lip hard to maintain her self-control. She had to get a hold of herself. All she was doing was brushing his hair. She couldn't brush his hair without getting aroused? Maybe her wanton behavior was something to do with being Nephilim. But no, she couldn't believe that, couldn't believe she was only half human.

Suddenly, she didn't want to leave this room. What she wanted was to tell Myrddin and Aliceanna to leave, then close and lock the door behind them. Then she'd spend the rest of the day enjoying Raven's body. In every possible way, she'd let him show her pleasures she'd never dreamt of. That was what she wanted. Instead, when she placed the second band at the bottom of his braid. He got to his feet and smiled down at her.

"You have a very dirty mind," he whispered so only she could hear. Her face heated with embarrassment. "Let's go," he said out loud.

## Chapter Seven

Charity shifted on her perch atop the bike. "I don't like motorcycles." Sitting in the size fives was proving to be difficult, but she wasn't about to let that redheaded witch know. The only thing Charity liked about being on the motorcycle was having Raven's thighs pressed tightly around her. Already she could feel a hard mass against her backside as Raven worked himself over the seat looking for a comfortable position. A part of her wished he'd find a good position and stay still. The way he was moving around behind her was torture.

When he finally settled in, he leaned forward and grasped the handles. Though the day was cold and she had on a heavy winter coat, heat enveloped her as his chest came into contact with her back. Her arms scorched where he touched her and warmth suffused her body. It was intimate, being this close to him, and she felt safe, as if his body would shield her from any danger. She'd never ridden a motorcycle, and while she didn't relish the thought of speeding down a highway on any open vehicle, she could get accustomed to this feeling.

"A car would be too constricting," Raven was explaining in a low voice. "If I need to escape with you, I'll have to fly. Protection spells are tricky things, Charity, and the one I did may not hold as well beyond the hotel. Should Azriel find us, I can escape more easily on a motorcycle. Anyway, I had Myrddin and Aliceanna ride the bikes here for this express purpose."

"Why don't we fly like before?"

"Because I want Myrddin with us at all times. He's a strong sorcerer. With the two of us present to protect you, I feel better about our chances of reaching Alaric."

He revved the engine and started forward so fast she bit her tongue in surprise. Myrddin and Aliceanna had already set off together on their bike. As the cycle sprang forward, Charity gripped his legs. Even though she knew she couldn't possibly fall from her position between Raven's thighs and the safety of his arms, she felt safer feeling his muscles constricting beneath her hands.

"If you need to speak to me," he was saying to her, "speak into the mic in the helmet, and all of us will hear you."

She didn't say anything, couldn't. She was too terrified. The sleek bike sliced the air under Raven's hands at top speed. The wind swooshed around her body and created an icy air pocket under her shirt and coat. She shivered.

Again she wondered how on earth she had come to this. Sure, she had said she wanted adventure. She'd thought she was meant for better things. Better things meaning a career change, adventure meaning a grand European vacation, not finding out that you're only half human and that some crazy demon is out to get you. She didn't want to be the person Raven said she was. She couldn't be that person. She was too ill-equipped. The person Raven described would need to be capable, confident, and courageous, three things she most assuredly was not. She was nervous, self-doubting, and cowardly, and she wanted to go home.

They were passing a dense wood when Charity located the small mic in her

helmet and began to speak. "Are we almost there?"

"It's only been ten minutes," Raven said.

She sighed.

Worse still, when Raven realized what a loser he'd kidnapped, he'd loathe her. He wouldn't be able to get rid of her fast enough. The thought of those sable eyes looking at her with anything other than the tenderness she'd seen so far filled her with dread. She had to try. She had to try to be the person Raven thought she was. What did she have to lose? Her fiancé was gone, and she didn't lament the ending of that relationship. Her job was a joke. Even if she hadn't taken two weeks off for her honeymoon, she'd have been happy to turn in her resignation. When she put things in perspective, the choice was simple. Either go back to Baltimore and continue life as a data entry clerk, or stay with Raven, Aliceanna, and Myrddin and become the kind of woman she'd always dreamed she could be. Capable. Confident. Courageous.

"What exactly are Nephilim?" she asked.

"I will explain it all to you later. For now, enjoy the ride."

"I'm sorry, but how do you think I can do that? You told me ...." She nearly slid off the bike in surprise when Raven wrapped an arm around her waist. "Shouldn't you be using that hand?"

"I should," he agreed, then proceeded to show her just how he intended to use it when he undid the button on her jeans.

Startled and aroused, Charity wasn't sure how to respond. "Um, I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Relax, Charity, and enjoy the ride. Do you forget what I am? I don't need my hands to steer this bike."

"Hey, hey," Aliceanna protested, "do we really need to hear this?"

Raven didn't respond. Instead, he slid her zipper down and eased one hand into her pants. She gasped when his fingers found her clitoris. He gasped when he realized just how wet and ready she was.

"Naughty girl," he said in a low voice.

"Oh, that feels good."

"Hey," Aliceanna insisted. "We have a job to do."

The trees whooshed by, but Charity didn't notice them anymore. Neither did she notice how fast they were riding or think about Nephilim. He tickled her sensitive nub with skilled fingers, numbing her to all but the feel of him. Desire oozed through her body as he touched the folds of her pussy with the skill of a pianist. She thought she'd go mad from the pleasure of it.

"You like that, don't you," he told her.

She didn't have to answer. Her body was doing all her talking for her. When he eased a finger deep inside of her, she let out a scream. "Oh, God, Raven, what are you doing to me?"

He eased another finger inside of her.

"What are you doing?" The voice in her ear shattered her concentration. Raven stiffened behind her.

That voice had come from Aliceanna.

"Aliceanna," Raven's voice was soothing, "what's the problem?"

"Son of a bitch," was her response.

"What's the problem?"

"Raven." It was Myrddin now. "We've got company."

Charity wanted to protest as Raven slid his hand from her and set his full attention on the road, but she knew that would be foolish. Something was wrong. Aliceanna hadn't sounded annoyed, but frightened.

The trees loomed high overhead, curving over the road and blocking out nearly all of the sun. They were cast in a premature gloom Charity hadn't noticed until now. The narrow, two-lane road seemed to have been cut directly through the center of a forest. Thick thatches of brush grew along the road's edge. Deep within the wood, all was black and foreign, and Charity suddenly realized this was the perfect place to stage an attack. Still, she didn't see anything that could pose a threat to them. Trees, underbrush, small animals and birds, but that was all.

"Who?" Raven was asking.

"Don't slow down, Myrddin," Aliceanna said. "Go faster."

"We need Raven," was Myrddin's response.

Raven revved, and the bike shot forward. "Azriel," he growled. "Hold on to me, Charity. Do not, under any circumstances, part from me. Do not look at Azriel. Do not talk to him. He can speak to you without any of us hearing. If he does, ignore him. Do you understand?"

She felt the perspiration forming on her forehead and tried to stay calm. Cold fear began to creep up her spine.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," she panted. "I won't listen to him, and I'll stay by your side at all times."

"What are they?" Aliceanna was asking in the headphones.

"I don't know," Myrddin said. "They're still too far away to make out."

"They wear rags."

"Azriel has gone completely mad. They're creatures from the Void. The guardians."

"Vampires?" Charity wondered in a small voice.

"No, Charity. Ghouls."

*I want to go home, I want to go home,* she thought.

Then, she saw them. Making their way through the wood. There had to be at least a hundred of them. A hundred loping, horned figures moving forward through the trees, matching the speed of the motorcycle perfectly. And like Raven, they had wings. Though even at this distance she could see their wings weren't covered in thick tufts of glossy fur. She couldn't tell what the wings were made of, but they looked rotted and mangled. Their mouths hung open, their heads were topped with scraggly hair that hung around faces that had gone putrid with what looked like decomposition.

Charity felt a scream bubbling up from someplace inside of her, a scream of pure, unadulterated fear. Fear unlike anything she'd ever felt. She swallowed hard to quell it.

The bike tilted hard to the left as they made their way around a curve. Raven had to slow in order to keep from losing control as he navigated the near one hundred eighty

degree turn. When they hit a straightaway again, Myrddin and Aliceanna came into view. Raven hit the gas hard.

"I see you," Raven said into the mic. "Keep going Myrddin. Aliceanna, make sure you hold tight to Myrddin. I don't want you falling off the bike."

"Let me use my magic, Raven. Let me fight them off," Aliceanna said.

"No! They're not close enough to harm us. They're trying to run with us, but they're not making any attempt to approach the road. If you strike out at them, they may attack."

"I don't want to wait until it's too late. We can handle them."

Again they had to slow to traverse another curve.

"No. They're not my concern."

"He's right," Myrddin said. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Aliceanna asked.

"The wind. Look at the sky."

"I can't see the sky. There are too many damn trees."

"Look through the breaks in the trees, then. I don't see the sun. The sky isn't blue anymore. It's gray. And the winds have picked up."

Charity's heart stuttered. "Azriel." Something coursed through her, but she couldn't--wouldn't--put a name on it. Her breasts began to ache. Try as she might to tell herself her body wasn't responding to his presence, she knew it was a lie. She still remembered those lips, so close to her own, the strength of his body as he pressed it against her, and the comforting sound of his voice. Azriel, Azriel, and Azriel.

Thunder boomed overhead, streaks of lightning had the world flickering from light to dark. The gloom deepened until Raven was forced to flick the headlights on. The loud buzz of the motorcycle was soon lost beneath the high-pitched squall of wind.

"Yes, Azriel is coming," Raven said. "Save your magic for him."

Raven kicked the motorcycle up a notch, but Charity knew it was useless. Already the wind was too strong for them to go much further. He was having a difficult time keeping the bike steady let alone getting it to go faster.

Azriel was close.

Thunder boomed.

"We have to stop," Myrddin said. "The wind is too strong."

"We can't stop. The ghouls'll be all over us," Aliceanna protested.

In the wood, they had come to a halt and stood watching. Charity guessed they knew the time for action was near. Surely the presence of those gargoyle-like creatures was a clear indicator that Azriel wasn't an angel. At least not like Raven. Azriel was bad, evil.

The bike slowed and she watched as Raven gazed out to the left at the lines of creatures staring at them. "Ready yourselves," he said into the mic. Then, without warning, a horde of the things were lifted up and into the air as if on marionette strings. They were propelled back and into the trees. Their decrepit bodies made soft thuds at impact. Raven jerked his head to the right and repeated the process.

Angry growls rose from the trees. The ghouls advanced.

In the headphones, male and female voices began chanting in low tones. They

were nonsense words to Charity. All consonants that didn't hold any meaning to her ears.

All talking ceased, however, with the squeal of tires. Charity looked ahead and saw Myrddin had stopped his bike. Before them, a tall figure stood in white. Flecks of electricity crackled through his platinum hair as gales of wind whipped around his body.

Aliceanna let out a tiny mew of distress.

Raven slammed the bike to a stop inches behind Myrddin and Aliceanna. As the roar of the motor smoothed to an idle, the wind died and the sky lightened. Azriel's hair settled against his chest, and a slow grin spread across his face.

"Don't look at him Charity," Raven said.

"You cut me to the quick, old friend," Azriel said to Raven. "Besides, she likes looking at me. Don't you, Charity?" In a move that would have impressed Mikhail Baryshnikov, Azriel stepped forward, executed a perfect ballerina spin, then bowed low to the ground.

Charity, unduly impressed at his agility, dropped her gaze and began staring at the ground. She had been looking at Azriel, staring hungrily at him. If she was going to make it out of this alive, she had to do exactly what Raven told her to do.

But even as she made this silent declaration, she was lifting her head to get just one more look at Azriel.

"Let me hurt him, Raven," Aliceanna was begging. Her hands were raised before her face and curved into claws.

"Hush, witch." Casually, Azriel lifted a hand and flicked it in Aliceanna's direction.

Aliceanna's hands went to her mouth, and she fell backwards. She slid off the bike and landed on the ground. Eyes wide with fear, she began rolling and pulling at her mouth.

"Bull's eye," Azriel announced.

Charity slid off the bike, instinctively wanting to help her, but Raven gripped her by the shoulder. "Stay with me."

"She needs help."

"Remember what I said."

She stilled. He was right, of course. And anyway, Myrddin was on the ground beside Aliceanna. He was trying to help her, but Aliceanna was too frantic.

"You devil," Myrddin yelled at Azriel. He spun to Raven. "He took her mouth. That devil took her mouth."

"Shall I take yours, too, warlock?" Azriel asked. "Your curses have no sway over me. I am more powerful than anything you have ever encountered in your pathetic little life." He sauntered to the fallen forms and hunkered low to the ground to speak directly into Myrddin's face. "I could smash you to bits."

Myrddin stiffened. Charity could see his biceps tense as the sorcerer struggled to maintain self-control. She sensed that even if Aliceanna didn't realize the folly of mindless action, Myrddin did. He would not let his emotions rule him. "As you will, demon."

"Precisely, sorcerer. Now if I could just bring my old friend around to that way of thinking." He rose and gazed at Raven who stared placidly back.

"Parlor tricks." Raven said, disgust evident in his voice. He waved a hand in Aliceanna's direction, restoring her mouth, but he didn't take his eyes off of his adversary. "Ghouls, mouth stealing, what's next?"

"I don't know, Raven. That depends on you." Azriel stepped forward, grinning like a loon. "Join me."

Aliceanna sat up, panting. Her face was streaked with tears, but she got to her feet. Her chest heaved, and she stood with her fists clenched at her sides. But she made no move to retaliate.

"Join in your quest to free the Nephilim? I don't think so. Yes, Azriel, I know that's the plan. Everyone knows. Why else would you want the girl?"

The lunatic grin slid from Azriel's face, and his voice became a low hiss. "How can you fight for them after what they did to us? Are you that desperate to return home? I say to hell with them and their rules. I will bring about a new world. I will change all the old rules. I will be the one who is worshipped. And I won't punish anyone who has the nerve to experience all that living has to offer the way you and I were punished. Join me, Raven. Rule with me. As for Charity, were you imprisoned for so long that you forgot your manhood? Women like her are the reason we left the heavens to begin with. Take my cause, Raven, and we can share her."

Charity felt Azriel's gaze on her.

"You would like that, wouldn't you, Charity?"

Charity took a step back and gazed down at her feet. Unbidden, an image of herself in bed, Azriel moving inside of her while Raven covered her body with kisses, flashed across her mind.

Azriel laughed. "That and more."

Charity's face heated. He could see her thoughts, read her mind just like Raven.

She was saved from responding when Raven broke in. "You'll never win, Azriel. Your whole plan is dependent on Charity, and I won't let you have her. She's mine, and I'm not willing to share." To punctuate his statement, he set his forearm around Charity's waist and pulled her close to him. "I don't have to share."

Azriel beamed. "Old friend, you don't have surprise on your side today, and that spell," he snorted, "that protection spell was laughable."

"It kept you away until now."

"Only because I knew you had to leave that stone monstrosity sometime. I decided to wait to retrieve the girl until a more convenient occasion presented itself."

"You can't have her, Azriel."

"I don't see how you can stop me. Besides, you have too many people to protect." Azriel smiled at Myrddin and Aliceanna, then gazed into the trees at the creatures that stood watching at the edge of the road. "Come," he said.

As one, the army of ghouls started forward.



## Chapter Eight

Charity screamed. Raven was off the bike in an instant. In one move, he freed himself of his cloak and cast it to the ground at his feet and tossed his helmet aside. Clamping his hand to Charity's wrist, he pulled her forward. His wings whipped out, and he folded her into his arms.

Aliceanna stumbled into Myrddin who wrapped his arms around her. He spun. Saw the beasts were coming at them from every angle.

The things moved slowly, confident that their victims didn't have any place to run. Low moans emanated from mouths dripping thick globs of saliva.

Like the crazed angel he was, Azriel clapped his hands in glee and did a celebratory two-step. "You can't fly with all of them, old friend. What will it be? Will you fly away with the girl and leave your ancient friend and his student here to die, or will you hand Charity over to me and save the sorcerers?"

"Make a circle," Aliceanna interrupted.

"We don't have time to make a circle."

For a moment, Aliceanna only stared at Charity, shocked by Charity's outburst. Charity didn't care if Aliceanna was shocked. What Charity wanted to do was scream. Scream and run, but Raven's hold on her was steel.

She felt him stiffen. In the next second, a group of ghouls were sent into the air. Raven spun, dragging her with him, and another group was cast into the air as if they were a band of rag dolls.

"We could make a circle with our bodies," Myrddin said. "Put Charity in the center."

"Oh joy," Azriel laughed, "you're putting up a fight. This should be good." He propped himself on a tree, folded his arms, and watched.

"No circle can hold Azriel at bay," Raven declared. "You can hold the ghouls back, but Azriel will be free to act at any time."

"Party pooper," Azriel said with an adolescent pout. "He's quite right, though. You forget, I taught the dark arts to man. Can the student outwit the teacher?"

Nobody responded to his taunts. The creatures were closing in, and while Raven was throwing them back with relative ease, more quickly filled in the gaps. They were close enough now for Charity to make out individual features. Split noses, leaking eyes, and tongues that slid free to lick at lips gone dry with age. The groans rose around them and the stench of decomposition was thick in the air. Charity gagged on the taste of it.

This was real.

She wondered briefly where other travelers were. Why didn't any cars pass them?

"Road's blocked," Azriel said, staring at her. "From both ends. I have you all to myself."

Myrddin's voice suddenly thundered above Azriel and the groans of the creatures. To Charity's ears, the foreign words sounded like curses. He held his staff high overhead, turned his face up to the sky and chanted in a loud, plaintive voice. The creatures stilled for a moment, stared as if taken aback by this new turn of events. Raven ceased knocking the creatures about to gaze at Myrddin, as well. As the sorcerer's voice rose, his body

began to shake. The normal tenor of his voice sunk into a deep bass Charity didn't recognize, and as she watched him, he slowly, inexplicably began to rise from the ground.

"Shit," she squeaked.

His staff came alive with light. As he hovered, legs spread, strawberry hair riding the wind, Charity realized he'd removed his helmet like Raven.

The creatures fell to their knees.

"Get up," Azriel screamed at them. "Get up now, you brood of cowards, or I will make you suffer a thousands deaths, each worse than the last."

Every instinct told Charity she should run now when she had the chance. Escape. The ghouls were so close already. Even on their knees, the sight of them terrified her. She didn't believe that their present docility would last.

Even as she thought this, Myrddin brought his glowing staff down until it was level with the first rank facing him. He held his free hand out to his side, and when Charity saw his face, she realized his jade eyes had gone completely white.

Charity reached for Raven's hand. When she found it, she squeezed. He returned her squeeze and whispered into her ear. "You have nothing to fear from Myrddin."

When Myrddin began to speak again, she wasn't so sure she believed Raven. The voice that came out of Myrddin as he glowered at the ghouls was, in a word, terrible.

Raven wrapped his arms protectively around her, and she sank into his warmth. She knew, or at least her mind knew, that Raven would protect her from any threat. She also knew Myrddin wasn't a threat. Still, she would have preferred to be anywhere but where she was.

She struggled to understand what Myrddin was saying, but again the language was foreign. It rang familiarly with her, but she wasn't sure if that was because she'd heard it before or because it made more sense than the last language he spoke.

Then it hit her. She had heard the language before. At Mass.

"Latin," she mumbled when she made out two of the words. "Dominus tecum,"

"The Lord is with thee," Raven translated.

A cold shiver ran down her spine. Myrddin wasn't chanting, he was praying.

Azriel screeched in rage. He sprang forward, half running and half dancing through the hordes of kneeling ghouls like a man gone crazy. "Suffer, suffer, and suffer," he raged. "All of you will suffer." He came to an abrupt halt and spun around to face his crouching minions, his face a mask of fury. "Get up, you cowards, or I will send you to hell where you belong."

Charity could plainly see Azriel didn't have to send the ghouls anywhere. Myrddin had taken care of that for him.

"Myrddin *is* sending them to hell," Raven explained unnecessarily.

Charity could see for herself what was happening. The creatures fell over and writhed on the ground, pleading for help from Azriel. Azriel, far beyond reason, danced around them, cursing them to misery and eternal damnation.

As she watched, the ghouls cowered on the ground, hands raised in supplication. A second later, they exploded into dust.

A howl of rage erupted from Azriel. He whirled on Myrddin, a slow wind rising

around him. "So, sorcerer, you think to match wits with me?"

Gone was the laughter. The smile was a memory. Charity found herself longing for it. In the space of a few seconds, Azriel had gone completely mad. And clearly he was far more dangerous than a million mindless ghouls.

He advanced on Myrddin, the winds rising around him as he came.

Myrddin lifted his staff before him, stretching the glowing hilt toward Azriel who glared. In a move so quick Charity hadn't seen it, Azriel lifted his hand. The staff was ripped from Myrddin and sent clattering to the ground.

Raven stepped in front of Charity, ordering her to stay close, then lifted a hand. But Azriel anticipated him. What should have been a forceful mind blow only made Azriel stumble. The next mind blow didn't even make Azriel falter.

"Witches," Azriel was mumbling under his breath.

Without his staff, Myrddin sunk to the earth. He dropped to his knees in search of his weapon, but Azriel was too fast. Faster even than Raven. One moment, Azriel was nearly ten feet from his prey, the next he was standing within their circle, Myrddin dangling from one hand by the throat. He shook the wizard as though he were nothing more than a child.

Aliceanna, in a complete panic, ran at the lunatic demon and began throwing her fists into him. All the while, Myrddin fought to strike Azriel with his foot and fist, but nothing fazed the beast.

Then Azriel was stumbling backwards. He let go of Myrddin, who crumpled to the ground.

Raven pressed the small advantage he had gained and flicked his head to the left. Azriel was lifted and sent sailing into a ditch at the side of the road.

Azriel roared. He rolled to his feet, jerking an arm out in Raven's direction. Raven was ready for it and only stumbled back a step. His muscular legs were spread as he regained his balance. He dropped his arms to his sides and stared on at Azriel who had come to stand in the road again, the wind churning around him.

"So this is your choice, Raven?" Azriel demanded. "This is how our friendship is to end? With us as enemies?"

"Your choice, not mine."

Azriel glanced at Myrddin, who had managed to sit upright. Azriel's lip curled as he looked at the wizard. "This isn't the last you've seen of me, sorcerer," Azriel promised.

Myrddin groaned, then grimaced at his weakness.

Raven bent to pick up the staff and bring it to the fallen wizard. As he moved he was careful to keep his eyes trained on Azriel.

"Let's say I give you something to remember me by," Azriel suggested amiably.

"Let's say you do not," Myrddin answered, brushing long strands of hair from his face.

Azriel grinned. "Hocus pocus," he said with a snap of his fingers.

Aliceanna screamed.

Charity turned, then cried out in surprise at the sight of Aliceanna on her knees in the road beside Myrddin, blood spilling from fresh wounds in her palms.

"Let her die like the God you love," Azriel declared.

Aliceanna rocked back at the sight of her own blood and landed on her butt with a thud.

"Bastard," Myrddin said to Azriel.

Raven, careful to keep an eye on Azriel, dropped to his knees beside her and took hold of her hands.

Azriel leered. "I think you'll find, old friend, that all of my tricks aren't of the *parlor* variety."

After a moment of unsuccessful attempts at staunching the blood, Raven faced his adversary. "What did you do to her?"

Azriel shrugged. "I suppose now is as good a time as any for me to take my leave."

"Be gone, demon," Myrddin shouted.

"As I said, sorcerer, this isn't over."

"Azriel, stop the flow," said Raven. "Or she'll die."

Azriel bowed low, set his eyes on Charity, then turned his back on them. Instead of gales of wind rising around him, she watched as two pairs of ivory wings unfolded on his back. He rose into the air, his wings flapping soundlessly.

Charity watched him until he was a dot on the horizon.

"Raven," Myrddin called, "she's losing too much blood. What did he do to her?"

Brows furrowed, Raven shook his head. "We have to stop the bleeding somehow. I don't know what he did so we'll have to use basic human methods. Cloth. We should make a tourniquet to slow the blood flow."

Glad for something to do, Charity set to ripping a swatch of material from her flannel shirt.

"*Nor is it over for you and me, Charity.*"

She jerked her head up and glanced at Raven, then at Myrddin. Both were bent to their task.

"*They can't hear me,*" the voice inside her head said. And she realized it was Azriel. Azriel speaking secretly to her.

Unbidden, she felt a stirring. Then a hot flush spread over her face. She couldn't explain her physical reaction to him. It was wrong. It was also wrong to look at him with desire, but she had. She'd memorized every inch of his body. In those last moments before he'd turned away, his face had undergone a dramatic change. He'd gone from scornful demon to loving angel so quickly, Charity wondered briefly if such a face as his was capable of the rage she had seen seconds earlier. He seemed more beautiful than she remembered. His lips had been parted, poised to give a kiss. They were so lush and pink. And his eyes were kind as he looked at her, almost pained, as if he was ashamed she had seen him lose control. His hands were limp at his sides. He'd looked so lost, so very miserable and misunderstood. She remembered thinking that very thing. Thinking he was just misunderstood.

"*I am.*"

She knew Raven didn't have any idea what was happening. She remembered his warnings about Azriel, remembered what Azriel was capable of, but she found herself drawn to him.

*"The way Raven misunderstands you," he continued.*

*"He doesn't misunderstand me."* She said silently just as Azriel had spoken to her, to see if he would hear her.

*"He plays with you. Seduces you, but refuses you. He doesn't trust you. He knows you'll be as powerful as him if he does."*

*"You speak ill of Raven while Aliceanna sits at bleeding to death because of your tricks."*

*"I'll heal the witch, but I want you to know that I don't care if you're as powerful as me. I'd never torment you with kisses, tempt you with my body, go to you in bed only to withdraw from you. Come to me, Charity, and I'll make love to you every morning. Every night I'll show you what heaven really is."*

She gasped out loud, her body longing to believe him even as her mind raged against all that he said.

"Demon!" Raven called. He strode to Charity, setting his arm around her waist and pulling her back. "Leave her, Azriel."

Azriel's low chuckle drifted away from them on the wind.

He was gone.

Raven faced her. "What did he say to you?"

She looked up into his sable eyes, searching them for a hint of the mistrust Azriel had spoken of. "He didn't say anything."

"I will not have you falling prey to him. Do you understand me, Charity?"

"Raven

," Myrddin called. "The bleeding has stopped."

## Chapter Nine

A roaring fire blazed in the fireplace to the left of the table where they sat. Fine linen cloths were set to the left of the most expensive, impractical dishes Charity had ever seen. They were edged in gold and encrusted with dainty jewels of ruby and emerald. These weren't the sort of dishes you ate on, but the kind you set in display cases. Nevertheless, she watched in silence as a parade of servers marched back and forth from the kitchens to pile the dishes high with food. It made her cringe just to watch it. Anyone who would serve grilled sausage and bread dumplings on rubies was simply a fool. Though she couldn't say she was surprised. Since she had seen the ornate wrought iron gates at the entrance, mansard roofs, and what looked to her like a perverse mix of Victorian and gothic architecture, she knew whomever lived in the house would be something of an eccentric.

They'd walked through the entrance gates and up the steps to the double doors of the entrance, while Charity wondered what this Alaric person would be like. His home was like something out of a dark fairy tale, beautiful and terrible all at once.

As she walked through the parlor, Myrddin suggested she look up at the ceiling to see the colorful painting that took up much of the ceiling.

The entire house was a bit showy for her tastes. And now, in a dining hall worthy of every Dracula movie ever made, she watched silently as dour servers hurried about them, seeing to their every whim.

Not for the first time, she wondered how she had gotten to this point in her life. Nothing she'd ever done could have prepared her to be sitting in some old mansion with a Watcher and two sorcerers while they waited for a vampire to return home.

"So, where is this Alaric?" she ventured, breaking the oppressive silence that had ruled since Azriel's departure in the wood.

Raven lifted a hand and gave her cheek a stroke. "I'm sorry. I have been remiss."

Her skin tingled at his touch. She'd give almost anything to be alone with him, but knew that wouldn't happen for a while. And even when they were alone, she doubted he'd do little more than stroke and tempt her with his kisses. She didn't know if she could bear any more of such sensual torture.

"You have been recovering after our encounter," Myrddin said, pulling his mass of hair from his face. "If I ever get my hands on Azriel . . ."

"What?" Aliceanna demanded. "What'll you do? You're no match for him. None of us are, except Raven."

"What do you suppose I do? Allow his attack of you to go unpunished? Do you realize he could have killed you?"

"Do you realize he could have just as easily kill you? What would I do then?" Her green eyes blazed defiantly. "I'll not have you go off to fight a battle you can't win."

"Is that so?"

"She's right, Myrddin." Raven set one hand against the table and the other against Charity's thigh under the table. He gave it a little squeeze that had a fire dancing up her leg. "You can't fight Azriel. He knows things that even I don't know."

"His attack will not go unpunished," Myrddin said. "You saw how he struck out at Aliceanna just to wound me."

"Ah, I did, just as you saw my impotence in dealing with that attack. He's simply too strong for you. And I can't protect all of us. Perhaps Alaric...." He let the words trail off. "No. We need Figlio, too."

"But doesn't Alaric possess spirit power?" Aliceanna held a wine glass up as a server poured wine into it. "You can fill it all the way up, you know," she told the server when she surveyed the half-filled glass. "I'm a big girl." She gave the male server a quick smile that had him blushing. "Anyway," she resumed, "I've seen Alaric move on the wind. I've seen him use the mind blow like you and Azriel did today. Alaric is powerful."

"As is Myrddin, but it matters not. Alaric moves on the wind, but not as a spirit. He's a vampire, not a shape shifter. And he's not one of the first as Figlio is. Alaric was made what he is, not born into it. But he is old and capable of moving matter with thought. That will be a help." Raven sighed. "We need to keep Charity safe."

Myrddin leaned forward in his chair and let his gaze fall on Charity. "What about Charity?"

Charity stiffened. "What about me?"

"You are Nephilim. Surely you know what that means, Raven?"

Raven removed his hand from her and began to shake his head. "No. That's too dangerous."

Aliceanna frowned at Raven. "But why? With your strength, with your abilities ... with the two of you, Azriel wouldn't stand a chance."

"I said no. Doing such a thing is forbidden. Would you have me return to my prison?"

"This wouldn't be sex for the sake of sex, though. You were sent here to do a job. Would they punish you for completing it? The girl is helpless right now. If Azriel got his hands on her, she wouldn't be able to protect herself."

Charity was getting tired of being referred to as 'the girl', but she did appreciate the sentiment. Aliceanna was right. Right now, she was helpless. She'd been nothing but a dead weight on the trip thus far. If Azriel took her, she'd be completely at his mercy.

"I will protect her."

"You involve her in this, expect her to risk her life, and won't give her the ability to protect herself? What about you, Myrddin?"

Myrddin was silent for a moment. "If Raven doesn't think ...."

Aliceanna slapped her forehead with the palm of her hand. "If I could do it myself I would, but you both know that being a woman, I can't. So you both would leave her weak and defenseless." When they said nothing, she sneered, "Just like men."

Charity decided she'd been a bystander in this long enough, sitting about silently as others decided what would happen to her. Damn it, this was her life, and Aliceanna was right, she had a right to protect herself. "He doesn't trust me."

Raven turned to look at her. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true. You read my mind as easily as Azriel does."

"I don't make a habit of arbitrarily intruding on your thoughts."

"But you have. I've felt you there just as I've felt Azriel. You know the silent war

my body rages against my mind. You know there's a part of me that wants to go to Azriel." Myrddin gasped, but she continued, "I know that as much as my mind rages against Azriel, my body longs for him. That doesn't mean I'll do as my body bids. I would never fight against you, Raven. And like Aliceanna said, I have a right to protect myself."

"Even should you come to see me as your enemy and Azriel your savior?"

"Ah, so it's true. Raven has come to walk among us."

The room fell silent for a moment, then they all turned to face the newcomer.

Two men stood at the entryway to the dining hall. One had to stand well over six and a half feet tall. His flowing golden locks hung over his shoulders, worn blue jeans hugged well shaped thighs, and a barely buttoned silk shirt displayed the kind of chest that could make a grown woman weep. The purple scarf he wore was wrapped jauntily around his throat. He was incredibly attractive, with eyes such a pale shade of gray that they seemed translucent.

The newcomer's companion stepped forward from the shadows, and Charity wasn't surprised that he too had the face of an angel. His pin straight hair was a dark plum red, a hue so deep it almost matched the black streaks in it. It hung past his slender shoulders and shone brilliantly under the firelight. Startlingly green eyes blazed in a face that looked no older than twenty. Though he, too, was attractive, exquisitely so with his fine-boned features and simple jeans and sweater, he was not half as imposing as the other was.

Without being told, she knew the gray-eyed one was Alaric. The air positively buzzed around him.

Myrddin quickly rose to his feet. "Alaric."

The golden-haired man came forward, pulling his companion along behind him by the hand.

Then everyone was standing.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Damon," Myrddin was saying.

"Alaric was kind enough to bring me with him," he explained. "Really I left him no other choice."

"The scoundrel would have attached himself to my leg had I refused him," Alaric said. He had a soft accent. Not French, maybe German. "You see, Raven, he, too, knew of your arrival. It has become quite the topic in the covens. Damon had to see you for himself. Please do rise off the floor, Damon," he admonished the crouching figure at Raven's feet. "You're embarrassing my guest."

Reluctantly, Damon got to his feet. He offered Raven one last respectful bow then backed away from him.

"And this must be Charity," Alaric continued. For a moment he froze and an expression she couldn't decipher crossed his face. She felt his translucent eyes fix on her a moment before he stepped away from Raven and came toward her.

"I am Alaric." He bowed low over her hand. "It is my greatest honor to make your acquaintance." When he rose, he let his gaze rove lustily from her eyes to the open buttons of her flannel shirt, where just the hint of cleavage was exposed. "I hope we have time to truly get to know each other." He darted a glance at Raven who stared disapprovingly back at him. Alaric grinned like a mischievous child. "You cannot expect



to keep such a jewel to yourself Raven. You must share." That said, Alaric stepped forward and pressed his lips delicately to hers.

The movement startled her. A small gasp escaped her lips before he stepped away, licking his lips.

"Lovely," he murmured

She gaped.

"Damon, come meet the lovely Nephilim female."

As bidden, Damon came forward and offered a slender hand. "A pleasure," he said simply.

Spanish, she decided.

"Everybody sit," Raven ordered. "Those of you inclined to eat, eat. Those of you whose tastes are of a more *particular* nature," he glanced at Alaric, "you'll have to wait until after we adjourn our little meeting here."

Alaric settled at Charity's left and continued his visual inventory of her. His gaze felt like a physical touch. Hot and very erotic.

"Is that a promise, great one?" Alaric asked.

Raven eyed him. "To a point. Am I going to have to move you, Alaric, or are you going to behave?"

In response, Alaric took great handfuls of Charity's hair and held them to his nose. "You smell like paradise, Charity."

"You're making her nervous, Alaric," Aliceanna said, clearly annoyed.

"Alaric?" Raven repeated.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the crooked smile slip from Alaric's face. He made quite a show of lifting his hands and allowing her hair to cascade through his fingers. "I will be a good boy, Raven. Cross my heart." He crossed his heart in a show of good will. Then he glanced across the table to Damon, who was examining his own reflection in a spoon. "Damon, you lovely creature, you. Come sit on my lap and amuse me."

Damon immediately went crimson, which amused Alaric to no end.

"So, you know all that has transpired?" Raven demanded of Alaric, bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand.

"Of course."

"We need your assurance that in the event Azriel succeeds, the Alliance will stand behind you as their leader."

"The Alliance will do as I wish," Alaric said confidently. "It is the rogues that I'm more concerned with. The rebels that refuse the kinship of any coven. They are disrespectful and high-minded. There is no telling what disasters they will embroil themselves in given half a chance. The more rebellious of the batch will follow Azriel on principle alone. Thumbing their noses to authority, and that bit." He paused. "When on earth did I become an authority figure?"

"Since you became Coven Lord of the Alliance."

"What's the Alliance?" Charity asked.

Alaric turned to face her; his eyes alight with mischief. "Take me to your bed, and maybe I'll tell you."

"Alaric," Raven admonished, "she's Nephilim, you know you can't do that."

Alaric raised a brow. "So she would become vampire for a time. I could show her the ecstasy that is drinking blood." He encircled her wrist with one hand. "You're so tiny for a Nephilim. So fragile. Like a small doll. I could do things to you you've never imagined. There is an ecstasy in making love and sharing blood like no other I have known. And I'm old."

Raven wrapped an arm about her shoulders and pulled her free of Alaric. "I assure you, Alaric, were she a doll, the only one to play with her would be me."

"Possessive, are we?"

"Very." Raven's sable eyes narrowed.

Alaric sat back in his chair and eyed the angry angel, his lips quirking into a slight grin. "Ah, very well, Raven, but if you decide you would like to share...."

"I won't."

"Alaric." Charity said.

"How sweet my name sounds on your lips."

She flushed. "Would you explain to me what ... who the Nephilim are?"

His eyes widened for a moment, and he leaned forward to look at Raven. "Surely you've explained this to her, Raven?"

"Are you questioning my judgment, Alaric?"

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing. But you do realize she should know the basics of who she is?"

"In truth, that's precisely what I was doing when Myrddin and Aliceanna arrived at the hotel."

"Okay, then, who are the Nephilim? Where do they come from?" Charity stopped when Raven held up a hand to halt her.

"Nephilim, quite simply, are the offspring of fallen angels." Raven jabbed a finger at Alaric. "Alaric was made into a vampire by one of the first brood--a vampire whose father was a fallen angel. Alaric's blood is nearly pure, that's why he's so huge. I dare say he wasn't so large when he was human."

"Slightly smaller than I am now," Alaric mumbled.

"Damon was made by Alaric. His blood isn't as pure as Alaric's, but both are considered Nephilim because they have the blood of fallen angels in their veins. Still with me?"

Charity nodded.

"Damon's brother, Nuno is a lycan. A werewolf. He, too, has the blood of fallen angels and he, too, is considered a Nephilim. But there are other Nephilim who weren't born of Watchers, who aren't blood drinkers or shapeshifters. Those, Charity, are who you come from."

"You know of the war between God and Lucifer?" Raven asked.

She nodded.

"Good. You know Lucifer was cast out of heaven, and a third of the angels chose to follow him, so I don't have to cover that. Well, he and his horde were cast to the earth where they were to remain until the time of Judgment. They were here when God created man. After the creation of man, some of the fallen ones took on earthly forms and walked

the earth as men, consorting with humans ... procreating. Their offspring are also called Nephilim. Like all Nephilim they were large, most towering above six feet, some even topped seven feet. For that time on the earth when men were much smaller, the Nephilim were considered giants. They were bigger, stronger, and more evil than man had ever been or would ever be. These Nephilim lived on the earth as bloodthirsty savages for millennia, tormenting man until the cries of men reached God."

"This is where you come in," she guessed.

Raven nodded. "These first Nephilim are the reason why God sent Grigori-- Watchers to the earth. Our initial task was to destroy them. Once that was done, we were to watch over man, keep him safe."

"But instead you slept with them, too."

"Is it a wonder," Alaric said dryly, "God was so angry? Is sex all your lot thinks about, Raven?"

Raven ignored Alaric. "There was a race of men," he continued, "a forgotten race known as the Shilesian. They had been fighting the Nephilim in what is now considered North Africa. The fight had gone on for years, with the Nephilim winning easy victories over their weaker human adversaries. The Grigori joined these human fighters and expelled these Nephilim from the earth into a realm called Hir na Gog. Never again could they cross the barrier between worlds to inhabit earth, and to ensure their imprisonment, no human could ever cross the barrier from earth to their realm. These Nephilim were effectively trapped."

She couldn't begin to digest this. This was all simply too bizarre. "And Azriel is looking for them. But why?"

Myrddin picked up the story here. "Over the centuries, many of these Nephilim have tried unsuccessfully to return to the earth. Every one of them has died. Some last a day on earth, raping, murdering, committing various acts of violence before they die, but most die within minutes. They simply cannot exist in this realm anymore."

"But if they had a human within their world," Raven interrupted, "they could mate with that human and take on human characteristics and journey back to the earth, thus breaking the barrier between the worlds. Until now such a thing has been impossible because no human can bear the journey from earth to Hir na Gog. Only a Nephilim from their bloodline can travel from the earthly realm to the territory where they have been exiled. Do you see the problem?"

"And that is where you come in, Charity," Alaric said.

"Because I'm half human and half Nephilim? I'd be able get to Hir na Gog, wouldn't I?"

"Yes! And once you were there you could mate with your ancestors and ...."

"They'd take on my human characteristics and be able to come back to earth."

"Precisely," Raven said, "And that is why Azriel wants you. Once you freed the Nephilim, they would join with Azriel and wage war against the earth. The Nephilim have had centuries to rage about their exile, centuries to plan their revenge. If they return to earth, life as we know it would change."

"But how is it possible that I'm one of them? My mother would never have...." She trailed off. "Of course," she said at last. "You're telling me that my mother was

raped. You're saying that I am the offspring of a murderous, shameless, demon rapist. "When nobody responded, she whirled on Raven. "That's what you're saying, isn't it?"

The table had gone quiet.

When Raven finally spoke, his voice was low and gentle. "Your mother never said anything to you?"

"No!" She shoved her plate away. "What could she say? Hey Charity, did I ever tell you that your father is a demon?"

"I'm sorry, Charity."

"A lot of good that does me."

"But you're safe now," Myrddin leaned across the table and tried to smile. "Michael told Raven he was to bring you here. You're here now. The rest is up to Alaric."

Alaric snorted. "Thanks a lot."

"Suddenly I'm not hungry any more." She was silent as they continued to talk. She was too angry to offer anything useful to the conversation.

It wasn't a wonder that Raven didn't want her looking at Azriel. Already she'd allowed herself to be seduced by his power and softened by his beauty. Allowing herself to fall prey to Azriel would mean ruin. Not just for her, but for everyone. It was too much. She wished Raven had told her this earlier, before she had phoned her mother to tell her mother she, Charity, was safe and not to worry. She would have questioned her mother about this, made her confess the truth of it.

"So, we're decided," Myrddin was saying, "Alaric will ensure the support of the coven leaders and thus the covens, shifting the balance of power to our side should Alaric find another way to free the Nephilim and war becomes eminent. All we need do now is locate Figlio."

"Figlio?" Damon, who had been gazing at Raven like a love-struck puppy, shook himself from his stupor. "I have seen Figlio. Before I went to you, Alaric."

"Where?" Raven demanded.

"He has a place in Florida. Very secluded and very private."

"But I know of that place. I searched it for him and found it empty."

Damon shrugged. "That's where I saw him last."

"No doubt, Raven," Alaric suggested, "he knows of your presence and has gone into hiding. He doesn't want to see you. Refuses even to acknowledge you. For someone so old, he is behaving like a brat."

"Can you find him?" Raven asked.

"Even if I find him, there's no guarantee he'll return with me. Nevertheless, Damon and I will leave tomorrow. I'll also leave word with the coven leaders that we are to meet to discuss the Azriel situation and plan for the possible battle."

"In the meantime," said Myrddin, "Aliceanna and I will set a protective shield around the house. Azriel will be able to breach it of course, but not without us knowing."

Raven rose from the table, pulling Charity up with him. "Very good."

"Until tomorrow, then," Alaric said.

## Chapter Ten

Charity followed Raven up the stairs to their rooms. She'd thought she'd want to be alone with him again, but as he led her up the stairs she wasn't so sure. She'd been given too much to think about. All she wanted now was to crawl into bed and sleep. Forget about this day and everything that had happened to her. Wake up tomorrow fresh, and maybe find this had all been a dream. But she wouldn't hold out hope for that.

"You're quiet," Raven said to her.

"Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Everything. Azriel, Alaric, Figlio. Everything and everyone."

He pushed the bedroom door open and led her in. Massive windows stood out on walls decorated with antique rose wallpaper. A bed, piled high with comforters, lacy quilts, and pillows loomed before yet another blazing fireplace. The room had a dark, ominous feel to it, as did the rest of the house.

Charity turned when she heard the bedroom door shut behind her. Raven stood at the door. He turned a key in the lock, effectively shutting them in, then walked to an armoire.

"What are you doing?"

He answered the question by setting the key atop the armoire far out of her reach.

"So, am I your prisoner now?"

"You've been my prisoner since we met."

\* \* \* \*

He couldn't say when he had decided, or whether it was because he feared someone would beat him to it, but he had finally made up his mind to have her. Not because she needed the strength he would give her, though, or even because he knew how desperately she wanted him. He would take her because he needed to take her. Needed to feel her body writhe beneath his. Needed to sheath himself deep within her warmth. He knew she wouldn't always be his for the taking. But while she was here with him, alone with him, he would have her. He would take her as many times as he wanted in as many ways as he wanted and there was nobody to stop him.

"Take off your clothes," he whispered, advancing until he had her pressed between the wall and his body. He lowered his mouth to hers and licked her lower lip, making circles over the sensitive flesh with his tongue. She tasted good, better than he remembered. But it wasn't enough. He needed more. So much more.

He closed his mouth over hers, kissed her with a hunger he hadn't known he had. All of his millennia imprisoned beneath the earth far from the touch of a woman seemed a distant memory as he ravished her mouth. "I want you so bad," he murmured against her lips.

"Do you really?" she asked, "Or is this another of your games?"

He ground his hips against her, letting her feel just how serious he was.

Her mouth trembled when she opened it to speak but no words came. Instead, she reached up with her free hand and ran her fingers through his hair. He knew she saw the

desire in his eyes just as much as she felt it in his kiss. It was a heady mix of erotic pleasure and carnal want to know she returned his feelings.

He settled his body more comfortably against her and kissed her again. Setting his arms at either side of her head, he let his mouth move against hers.

He was really going through with this. He nearly couldn't believe it. Michael had admonished him against it, but here he was. He couldn't concern himself with fear of the pit or fear of punishment. His cock had been throbbing for Charity since he'd first seen her. And she did need whatever power he could give her. She'd seemed so helpless out in the wood as the ghouls closed in on them, so in need of protection. Even then, his body stirred for her, and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from partaking of her. Now, with her body soft and pliant against his, his arousal was as much mental as physical. Her hair was fragrant with the scent of apples, and her body smelled like sweet vanilla cream. He would take her this night and love her like he'd loved no other woman in his entire existence, knowing well that this joining with her could very well be their last. So he would bury himself in her to his root. He'd forget Azriel and Michael and the whole damned world around them. He'd take her so completely that there would be only him and her and the heat of their bodies joined as one with the heady smell of sex hot on the air around them.

Her body was liquid heat beneath his touch. She moaned into his mouth and he tasted her, dipping his tongue deep into her sweetness and savoring the sheer delight in this simple pleasure.

"You belong to me tonight," he said as he lifted her and carried her to the bed. He settled her across the quilts. Even in jeans and a flannel shirt, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He stood over her, staring. He savored her lips, now puffy from kissing, and the great rounds of her breasts. Loved the way her body slimmed so delicately at her waist, only to flare again at her hips. Yes, he would have her tonight, and every night until Michael called Raven home.

He lowered himself until he covered her. Pressing his lips against her, he kissed her, sucking her tongue until she became fevered with need for him. Her hands came up to encircle his waist, and she pulled him to her as he deepened the kiss.

\* \* \* \*

Charity couldn't talk, couldn't even think straight. Every touch lit a fire within her, every kiss made her hungry for more. She feared she could never have enough of him. His taste filled her, yet she wanted more. The press of his body pinned her to the bed, yet she couldn't feel enough of him. Her hands roved his body. Mindless currents of passion flowed through her. She squeezed his buttocks, ran her hands down his thighs, felt his arousal pressing into her. There were a million things she wanted to do with him and things she hoped he would do to her. She never wanted this to end.

But then he was rising from her. Staring down at her again.

"Get up," he said. His voice, husky with want, sent shivers through her body. "I want you to strip for me."

"I can't strip. I ... I don't know how."

"I want you to stand before the fire and take your clothes off piece by piece. Nice and slow, so I can enjoy every inch of you. I want to look at you. Have my fill of you before I taste. See every bit of you before I feast."

His words send a shiver of pleasure through her. "But ...."

He pressed a finger over her lips. "Don't think. Just do as I say."

Feeling more than a little nervous, she rose to her feet. She'd never done anything of the sort before, and unexpectedly, her body quickened at the thought of removing every piece of clothing before a man like Raven. She felt the tickling trickle of desire between her thighs before she'd even stood by the fireplace and wondered how he could bring out such primal needs in her. She sauntered to a spot a few feet in front of the fire and turned to face him. She'd never sauntered before, but when she saw he'd dropped to the bed to gaze at her, she figured maybe she wasn't so bad at it.

"Take the shirt off," he said.

She brought her hands up to the shirt and began pulling at her buttons. One popped off and fell to the floor at her feet. Nervous, she kicked it aside and went on to the next button, glancing up to see if he'd noticed. She paused when she saw he was frowning at her.

"Nice and slow," he said. "We have all night."

She swallowed and fought down the urge to bite her fingernails. Slowly, she brought her hands to the remaining buttons and began to leisurely undo them.

"Yeah, that's it. Now look at me. I want your eyes on my face."

Again she had to fight down the urge to chew her nails. Stripping was one thing, but stripping and looking at him at the same time was a bit much for someone like her. Until she'd met Raven, she'd been about as sexually adventurous as a nun. Well, not quite like a nun, but nearly.

She lifted her head and took her gaze from her booted feet to the bed where he sat, grinning at her. His eyes bored into her where she stood. Slowly, lusciously, he licked his lips.

"You have no idea how badly I want you," he said. "You have no idea how good I'm going to make you feel."

A slow fire was building within her. With each button she unlatched, her desire rose to a higher, more fevered pitch until at last she undid the final button and stood before him with the flaps of the flannel open.

"Good girl. Now take it off."

She felt the heat of the fire warming her skin when she eased one arm free of the thick material. Then the other arm was free. All the while, she was conscious of his eyes on her, feasting on her as though she were a luscious morsel made for his pleasure.

"You're exquisite," Raven said. "Perfect. Good enough to eat. Want to know what I'm thinking right now?"

Unable to speak, she nodded.

"I'm wondering if that lacy blue bra of yours has matching panties."

"Vickey's Secret," she blurted. Figures, she finally says something and it makes absolutely no sense.

"Even more than that, I want to see the bare flesh beneath. I just don't know if I can wait." He shifted on the bed. "The bra," he ordered. "I want it off of you. Now."

Her breathing increasing. She bent her arms behind her back and undid the latches of the bra as he watched. His long braid had fallen over his shoulder and hung over his chest.

She shivered when she pulled the bra off and her breasts fell free of the constricting material. Immediately, the warmth of the fire warmed them, too. But what she wanted was the warmth of Raven's mouth on them, suckling them.

Raven moaned and settled one hand over his crotch, rubbing at the erection straining against his pants. "The things I'm gonna do to you," he promised between his teeth. "Come here. I want to taste you."

On wobbly legs, she went to him. She was so desperate to feel his mouth cover her breasts, so in need to feel his tongue on her nipples she wasn't sure she'd make it the short distance. When she got to him, he pulled her between his legs. His hands spanned her waist, and he pressed his cheek against her bared skin, breathing in the scent of her. She quivered at his touch, at the sheer need of him.

"So beautiful," Raven murmured. His mouth closed over her nipple. He flicked his wet tongue over the erect nub, and she arched her back in response. He sucked the bud between his teeth, applying just enough pressure to make her whimper. Her skin felt so sensitive, so responsive beneath his tongue. Great gulping sighs spilled from her as he licked the nipple.

"Oh, Raven," she moaned. "It feels so good. Please take me."

He pulled away from her and stared into her eyes. "Not yet."

He traced her spine with a finger, but when he reached her buttocks, he squeezed, pulling her closer still. He punctuated each squeeze of her butt with a torturous laving of one nipple, then the other.

She writhed, needing him so badly it hurt. When she thought she'd lose her mind, he set one hand between them and pushed her away. "Take off your boots. And your pants."

She gasped. "Please. I've waited all day."

"The boots and the pants."

She stepped back toward the fireplace, trying desperately to get control of herself. She knew he was playing her like a fiddle, but she couldn't help it. His touch excited her like nothing else. Every kiss sent heat shooting through her body, a heat so intense, she marveled that she managed to keep her wits about her. She knew he wanted her. Probably as much as she wanted him. She could tell from the look in his eyes and the vigor with which he rubbed at his swollen cock that he wanted her.

Then a thought occurred to her. If he was going to play games, why shouldn't she?

Deciding that was exactly what she would do, she bent and lifted her foot. Slowly, she worked the zipper of her boot down. She took even longer to do the second boot. One glance at him, at the impatient look in his eyes was enough for her to know she'd hit her mark.

"The pants. I want them off of you."

She smiled at him. "Of course." She undid the button of her jeans, lowered the



zipper, gave him another smile.

"Now."

Charity stepped out of her jeans. Raven's eyes were hot on her, and she loved the way it felt.

Turning to face the fire so he had an unobstructed view of her blue thong, she bent to remove her socks. She heard a low growl emanating from the bed behind her and tried to keep from smiling. Before she stood erect again, she gave him a little wiggle. What she couldn't see was Raven getting to his feet and starting forward. One moment she was wiggling, the next, he'd lifted her, cradling her in his arms, and carried her to the bed. He tossed her across the comforter and tore her panties from her body before she'd had a chance to orient herself. Then he was climbing atop her. Pinning her arms to the mattress over her head, he threw a leg over her and straddled her.

"So, you would torture me," he demanded of her.

She writhed, enjoying the sleek feel of his snakeskin pants against her bare flesh and loving how his erection pressed into her. She could feel the taut muscles that stood out on his thighs flexing against her as he repositioned himself. The fact that he was fully clothed while she was naked didn't escape her notice either. But she felt a power in her nakedness, a control she had never felt before and she liked it.

"I only did as you told me to do."

"Oh, is that so? I told you to torment me?"

"You said to be slow."

He considered her for a moment. "So I did. But I changed my mind."

He lay across her, slipped his tongue into her mouth. He tasted of the wine they'd had with dinner and of bread dumplings. He was ambrosia and every fantasy she'd ever had, everything she'd ever wanted. He plundered her. He was so masterful, and she wanted more than anything to play the love slave for him. She'd never felt such desires.

"Take me, Raven. Make love to me now. I want you."

He pulled his mouth free of hers and gazed at her. For a moment he only stared down at her, grinning. "I bet you do," he said at last. "Why don't you tell me how much?"

"A lot."

"Mmm."

He bent over her again, placing kisses across her throat, feather light kisses that both tickled and tormented her. Then he was running his tongue along the inflamed flesh, tasting her at one moment, nipping her gently the next. She wanted to scream out from the sheer pleasure of it. It felt so good.

"You like that?" he asked, gazing into her eyes.

"Yes."

He licked a trail down her breast until he found her nipple. The air came out of her on a sigh. He licked around the sensitive nub, nibbling on it as she squirmed. When he closed his mouth over it, she thought she'd swoon. Liquid fire coursed through her veins, and her pussy clenched. Pleasure pummeled her as she fought for control but couldn't find it. Only one thing could sate her need.

"Raven. Please. I need you."

He sucked the pert nub into his mouth and closed his teeth around it, flicking it

with his tongue. She twisted beneath his erotic assault, desperate for release. He made a meal of her, moving from one breast to the other, sending bolts of electricity through her body.

"Please," she begged again.

"You're my little prisoner now."

She was more than happy to be his prisoner. She was more than happy to be whatever he wanted her to be, and he knew it. She just wanted an end to this torment, a release to her suffering. She needed him inside of her.

"Tell me you're mine," he said in a low voice.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Had she forgotten how to speak? All she could think about was having their bodies joined as one and the ecstasy such a union would bring.

"Tell me you belong to me," he ordered, licking the hollow between her breasts.

She shivered at the intimate touch of his tongue against her. Struggling for control, she cleared her throat and spoke in a soft voice. "I belong to you."

He smiled, then ran a finger lightly between her breasts where his lips had been, then over her stomach. He pressed his lips to her stomach and ran his tongue along her belly, poking her navel with it and enjoying how fiercely her body reacted to him.

Then he brought his hand to rest just above the junction of her thighs. She panted, hungry for his touch. He closed his hand over her throbbing clit and stroked her.

She purred like a cat in heat.

"How does that feel?"

"So good."

He tickled her with his fingers, nudging them just a hint deeper. With his knee, he pushed her legs wider until she was completely open for him.

"How much do you want me?" he asked.

"Please ... don't torture me," she panted.

He eased a finger inside of her, and she nearly came. She arched at the unexpected pleasure, and her heart thudded against her chest. He slid his finger in, then let it glide out and she was in paradise. The second time, he inserted two fingers instead of one. Her body rocked.

"You're so tight," he said. "I can't wait to be inside of you."

"Then don't."

He found her breasts again with his tongue. He sucked the nipple into his mouth while he stroked her clitoris with his thumb. She cried out when he began making little circles on the sensitive flesh while he eased two fingers in and out of her. Her body was on fire. Every part of her was a mass of erotic sensation. Everywhere he touched came alive, and she didn't know if she could take the teasing a moment longer.

"Please, Raven. Please. Now."

He removed his fingers from her depths and got to his feet. In seconds, he'd removed his pants, his shirt, and loosened his hair so it fell over his shoulders like a cascade of silk. Then he was on the bed again, settling himself between her thighs and covering her body with his. He rested his weight on his elbows.

"If only this night could go on forever," she said.

"Beg me," he ordered, resting his erection at her opening.

"You feel so big. What if you don't fit?"

"Oh, I'll fit." He rocked his hips against her. "And you'll love it."

"Yes, please. Now. I'm begging you."

She wrapped her legs about his waist, and he pressed the head of his cock to her moist cleft.

She stilled.

"You know I'm not human, that I'm a fallen being. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Even the sound of his voice sent shockwaves through her. As he spoke, his lips moved against her skin as gently as if they were butterfly wings.

"Yes."

He flexed his hips, and the head of his cock slid into her. She arched her back and panted. Pleasure came at her in waves. It felt so good, but she had to have more.

"More," she pleaded, clasping his shoulders.

He rocked his hips slowly so another inch slid in. His arms quivered as he struggled for control.

"More," she repeated.

It was such a perfect torture, the ecstasy and the agony, the friction of his entrance, and the unquenched desire as he slid in. She would go mad. She would swoon. She wrapped her legs tighter around him and pulled him toward her.

He gritted his teeth, braced his weight on his arms, and drove into her.

"Yes!" she screamed, not caring if anybody heard her.

Waves of liquid fire drove up her channel, filling her womb with explosive heat as Raven filled every bit of her. Rapture unlike anything she'd ever known coursed through every part of her body. She bucked beneath him, out of control and loving it. Nothing had ever felt this good or could ever feel as good as this.

Slowly, he began to move inside her.

Ecstasy washed over her. She tightened her hold on him and pulled herself closer. She was desperate to kiss him and feel him and taste him.

He rocked his hips, driving his cock deeper. She moaned and threw her head back.

"Wonderful," he said.

"You feel better," she said, then moaned his name. It was all she could do. Each thrust brought her closer to the edge, every time she felt him pull back until he'd almost slipped free of her, she'd brace herself for the sensation of having him fill her again. Each time he slid back, he'd thrust in deeper. Eased back and sank in. It felt so good.

"Never want this to end," he said, closing his mouth over hers and delving deep with his tongue.

She loved the feel of him suckling her tongue, letting his thrusts get harder and the friction more intense. He pummeled her with his body until the pleasure became unbearable. It built and radiated out, spreading until she lay beneath him, panting at his kisses and gasping with every thrust. He claimed her mouth, ravished her body, plunging until she could scarce breathe.

"Come for me," he whispered against her ear.

The last shreds of her control evaporated as pleasure erupted inside of her, and an orgasm so intense she thought she'd swoon rocketed throughout her body. Raven pressed his lips to hers, swallowing her gasps. She trembled beneath him, bucking her hips.

As her body shuddered from her release, Raven drove into her harder, gritting his teeth as she answered every thrust with one of her own. It wasn't long before he stiffened, shuddered, and released with a loud moan.

Sweat melded their bodies and their wet hair tangled together as if it belonged to one person. They clung to each other, sated for the moment, but knowing well this wouldn't be their last joining for the night.

## Chapter Eleven

The fire had begun to die down nearly an hour earlier, and a brisk chill filled the room. Charity stirred in the bed. Sex with Raven had been amazing. She had never dreamed she would experience lovemaking with so skilled a partner. He knew exactly what to do to her and when to do it. He was the perfect man, even if he wasn't a man. But she supposed that didn't matter. If he was to be believed, she herself was only half human.

She shifted in the bed, careful not to disturb Raven, who had one thigh thrown over her stomach and one arm splayed across her chest. It felt good to be lying there with him. With a man who truly cared for her and wanted her for who she was, not what he wanted her to be. Though they'd been together two days, she'd only really known him this day, but she felt closer to him than anyone man she'd known.

"You're awake."

She grinned and rolled to face him. She noted she was still sticky, but didn't mind. "I thought you were asleep."

"Been watching you sleep."

He wrapped his leg around her and pulled her close, folding her in his arms. The kiss was sweet, wet, and deep, and she could feel his limp cock rising to life against her thigh.

"You're insatiable," she admonished with a laugh.

"And you love it."

She did. She reached around him, grabbed a handful of butt and squeezed. "I do."

Growling low in his throat, he rolled on top of her, pulling her arms from around him and pinioning them to the bed. "What do you suggest I do about my insatiable appetite?"

"Whatever you want. I'm yours forever."

He paused mid way to kissing her and stiffened. A second later, he was rolling off of her.

"What's wrong?"

"I just want to make sure you understand how it has to be between us."

"What's to understand?"

"That forever can only be for the time I'm here, but no more than that."

She started to sit up, but he pressed her back into the bed.

"Why would you say that?"

"Don't forget what I am, Charity. My place isn't among men. It took me centuries to learn that lesson, but I've learned. My place is in the heavens. When I complete my task, I'm going home. I must go home."

Her face began to crumple. Wasn't it just like life to offer her a glimmer of happiness, then snatch it away. "You would leave me?"

"Don't cry. I would never leave you alone. Trust me when I say everything will be fine."

"How could it be fine if you're gone?"

"Trust me."

She shoved his hands away and sat up. "Trust you. How on earth can I trust you

when you sleep with me one minute and tell me to shove off the next?"

"That's not what I'm saying, and you know it." By now, he, too, was sitting up in the bed, staring at her with those huge, sable eyes of his. "I don't belong here."

"Then take me with you. If I'm half Nephilim, then ...."

"You know I can't do that. You have your whole life ahead of you, which isn't inconsiderable. Do you understand what being Nephilim means?"

"I don't care what it means if I have to be away from you."

"It means you're immortal. You don't have to live your life in a few decades. You're timeless, like Myrddin and Alaric ... and Figlio. Like Aliceanna will be at the end of her training."

"I don't care about Myrddin or Alaric or Figlio, whoever the hell he is."

She pushed the covers aside and stepped from the bed with him fast on her heels. Grabbing her forearm, he twisted her around. "You should spend your time with a man who is immortal like you. A man you can truly share yourself with." He paused for a moment and gazed into her eyes. "A man like Figlio."

"I don't even know Figlio. And I don't want to know him." She tried to jerk away, but she might as well have been trying to bust through a brick wall with her bare hands. He was truly that immovable.

"The choice is not yours to make, Charity."

She stilled in his grasp and stared at him. "Fine." His grip on her had slackened so she pulled free of him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"For a walk."

"Are you crazy? You know Azriel could be anywhere."

"Yes, he could. And I wonder if he'd cast me off after he'd had his fill of me."

Raven grabbed her arms and pulled her against his chest. "I don't want to leave you, Charity, but I have to. I'm not human. I don't belong here."

"I'm not going outside," she said, ignoring his last statement. "Aliceanna said Alaric has an extensive library downstairs. I want to find a book ... read ... just get the hell away from you." When he let go of her, she pulled a sheer robe from the armoire and shrugged into it. "Will you let me out, or am I your prisoner?" Last time she said those words, she hadn't meant it. This time, however, she did. "If Myrddin has set his spell around the house nothing can happen to me. Azriel can't get in without you knowing, and there's no way I'm going out."

Raven stared at her for a moment, regret heavy in his eyes. Then he reached over the armoire and clasped the keys. "If you're not back in an hour, I'm coming for you."

She followed him to the door and waited for him to unlock it. When she stepped out of the room, she glanced back at him. "I need time to think, Raven. My entire life has changed in two days time, and I don't think I've had one chance today to stop and think about that. I'll be back in an hour."

\* \* \* \*

As she made her way down yet another hall, candle held before her, she realized she should have asked Raven for directions. Alaric's house was huge. There was too much of it and every gloomy corridor held countless shadows. Alaric really should step

into the twenty-first century and see the beauty that was electric lights. She could admit that the candles gave the house a romantic/gothic kind of ambiance that electric lighting would not have, but it would probably take her an hour just to find the library now, let alone getting back to the room. She didn't want to think about that though. If she thought about that, she'd think about how good Raven had felt inside of her and how right it felt to be with him. Then she would think about how he had deceived her.

What kind of man would make love to a woman knowing there was no future for them? At the very least, he should have told her beforehand, given her the choice of whether or not she wanted to make love knowing he would be gone soon. Once he left her, she'd never see him again.

This sudden realization struck her with the force of a blow. He was leaving her. She'd known him but a day, and already she'd begun to fall in love with him. With God knew how much time left to spend with him, how would she keep herself from falling for him even more? She couldn't. She simply could not.

A small, inner voice demanded, "*But what else can he do? He's not human.*" Annoyed at herself for having such a reasonable thought, she plowed on. He should have told her beforehand. Sure, more than likely it would not have stopped her, but at least she would have known how things stood.

"On your knees like a good girl."

She jerked her head up and looked around. Azriel? She wondered, but no, that hadn't been Azriel. Why would Azriel be telling her to get on her knees like a good girl? And the sound hadn't come from within her head but from within the hall.

"That's it. On all fours."

No, she decided as she made her way slowly down the hall, that wasn't Azriel at all. Azriel's voice was different. He spoke unaccented English like television newscasters, this voice spoke English but with an accent. A German accent.

She knew who she'd see before she found the wide double doors and peaked in.

Alaric sat on a leather sofa, his silk shirt thrown wide, his jeans unbuckled and his belt resting casually on his thigh. In one hand, he held a goblet of some syrupy red fluid--blood, perhaps--while he gazed down at a figure crouching submissively at his feet.

Well, Charity thought, she'd finally found the library.

Aliceanna, red hair wild on her head and naked as the day she was born, bent low to the floor and placed adoring kisses on Alaric's boots. Her pale white bottom, raised high into the air, reflected the candlelight. From the looks of things, Alaric's belt hadn't been as innocent as it now seemed. Bright red stripes lined Aliceanna's backside and thighs, but she didn't seem to mind.

"You missed a spot, sweetie," Alaric said with a stern voice. He released a breath and got to his feet, mindless of Aliceanna as he shoved her aside with one booted foot.

"How can we forgive you if don't do a good job?"

Charity turned to see where this other voice had come from. Damon, arms folded and one thigh propped onto the edge of a table, gazed down at the beautiful redhead.

"You, of all people." Alaric resumed, shaking his head sadly. "I have my pride after all."

Aliceanna scurried to catch up with Alaric as he crossed to a bookcase and began

perusing the volumes. As if he had nothing more on his mind right now than reading a good book.

"You are the most beautiful of all creatures, Alaric. But how could I have known?" Aliceanna said, "I never saw her before this day, I swear it."

Alaric shrugged, unimpressed.

"I'm sorry. Had I known she had a face that would remind you of Smenkhare--"

"I told you never to say that name."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry what?"

Aliceanna swallowed hard then took a few deep breaths. Apparently she was having a hard time getting the words to come out.

Alaric whirled on her, shoving her gently back with the toe of his boot so she sprawled on her back. "I'm sorry, what?" he demanded.

Aliceanna stared at Alaric as he came to stand over her. "I'm sorry, my most beautiful master," she finally said.

Alaric's face lit with pleasure. It was a feral look, predatory in every manner. The cat that cornered the mouse.

"Good girl," Alaric said. He placed a hand over his zipper and began to lower it. "Now I think I've something else for you to do with that mouth of yours."

Charity had never seen anything like this in her life. That Alaric--and probably Damon--had whipped Aliceanna was obvious, that Aliceanna was some sort of slave to them was obvious, but what Charity couldn't understand was what on earth made Aliceanna submit to such. That she did in fact submit was obvious. Why else would she kiss the boots of her tormentor if she didn't enjoy the torment? Where on earth was Myrddin? What would he think of this?

Alaric was on his knees, crouching over Aliceanna's face, shoving his pants open, and Charity realized what was about to happen. Aliceanna was going to suck Alaric. Aliceanna was going to give Alaric head.

Charity gasped.

Alaric jerked around and Charity clamped her hand over her mouth a few seconds too late. She blew out her candle and stepped away from the door, careful not to step too hard on any of the floorboards. She retreated until she felt the opposite wall against her back. Chest heaving, praying Alaric wouldn't come out to investigate, she froze. Only then did she realize the hall was lined with deep wall recesses that held candles. Blowing out her lone candle hadn't done a thing.

Ten seconds passed, fifteen, twenty, nothing happened. She'd been lucky. What on earth would she say to her host had he caught her playing the voyeur? She could try the truth, she supposed. That she'd come down to the library to find a book and found something far more interesting instead, that she'd never seen such an interesting interaction before and had let her curiosity get the better of her.

She turned to leave, grateful she didn't have to think up any such excuses.

She made it five steps when a voice stopped her cold in her tracks.

"Leaving so soon?"

She turned slowly, her face heating with embarrassment. As soon as she saw him,



his large frame filling the hall, she wanted to kick herself. "I'm sorry," she said, and launched into her looking for a book excuse. But he cut her off.

"Do I look offended?"

He held the flaps of his shirt wide as he stood, hands on hips. His fastened jeans seemed tighter now, snugger as they hugged every muscle. And his boots gleamed.

"No," she answered. "I just didn't want you to think ill of me." Apology made, she turned to leave, then screamed. She'd walked straight into an unyielding mass of ... man. She jumped back, hand over her mouth, as Alaric stared down at her. Like a fool, she looked over her shoulder at the library door where he should have been standing. Where he had been standing a second ago. "How'd you do that?"

"I only wish to know," he said, stepping closer to her, "if you came here to see Damon and me fuck Aliceanna, or if you came here because you want us to fuck you?"

She backpedaled until she came against another unyielding mass she wished had been a wall.

Damon's arousal was unmistakable as it pressed into her back.

"Has Raven sent us a gift, Alaric?" Damon asked. "A pretty toy to play with." He wrapped his arms around her, and the clean fresh scent of soap filled her nostrils. He hugged her to him as though he was a four-year-old girl, and she was his new baby doll. "I do hope he has. I would love to play with her."

Alaric edged closer, bunching her hair in one hand and bringing the mass of it to his nose to smell. She felt the rough press of his jeans through the thin material of her robe and cursed herself for not wearing something a little less revealing.

"I can't say, Damon, but I hope so, as well. She smells of apples."

Damon pressed closer to her, his erection jutting harder into her back. Then his hands were on the ties of her robe. Before she had a chance to protest, he pulled the loops free and eased the robe wide.

Alaric stared down at her naked body, grinning his feline smile. Suddenly she felt like the mouse.

"Why Raven let you out of his sight, I cannot say."

"To come to us," Damon insisted, running his hands over her thighs as he spoke.

She knew she should do something—run, scream, anything, but she didn't do a thing. She stared up at Alaric as he got his fill of her. This had truly been the most bizarre day of her life, and from the look of things, it was about to get a whole lot stranger.

What better way to get over Raven than to enjoy the company of two attractive men, even if the men were vampires? But she knew even before the thought was finished that she'd never be able to go through with such a thing. She'd only just been with Raven. And it was Raven she wanted. Even knowing at the end of this he was planning to leave her wasn't enough of a deterrent to make her want to back off. She wanted Raven, and somehow, by the time this adventure was at an end, she would have him.

Damon reached around her to take her hair from Alaric. She nearly cried out when he jerked it back, pulling her head against his chest so her neck was bared for Alaric.

Alaric panted, stepped closer to her until his jeans were rubbing her naked flesh raw. He reached inside her robe and wrapped large hands over her breasts. Damon was at

her neck, running his tongue along her carotid and covering her with tiny kisses. When Alaric bent forward and closed his mouth over hers, she was too surprised to protest.

She gasped as the heat of him enveloped her. His lips were soft against hers, insistent, and she could feel the desire to struggle slowly ebbing away.

"See, Alaric," Damon insisted, "she wants us to play with her. Have you ever been with two men before, Charity?"

She couldn't answer with Alaric's tongue filling her mouth, claiming her as if he owned her. When Alaric pulled away, she was gasping for breath.

"Take her into the library, Damon. We can't very well have her right here in the hall."

"Hey! No!"

Ignoring her, Damon wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted. When he entered the library with her, and she heard Alaric close the door behind them, a slow panic began to build within. She was alone in the library with two men who wanted to have sex with her. And they weren't just two men, they were two vampires. Aliceanna was still there, crouched on the floor, but she wouldn't be any help. Not in her present state of submissive bliss.

Damon set Charity on the floor, spun her to face him, then shoved her back so she landed on the couch. She fell back, her robe falling open again. She fumbled to close it as Alaric came to stand beside Damon. Seeing the pair of them standing there, she knew any woman would kill to be in her position, but really all she wanted, all she needed was Raven. And she would have him. If it was the last thing she did.

She was about to tell them as much when she saw they were both smiling at her. Smiling with fangs. Vampires. They were going to kill her.

She shot to her feet. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "but there's been some mistake. See, I'm with Raven, and I just came here to get a book. I saw the two of you, and I know I shouldn't have stared, but I did. You're both very attractive. Beautiful, even, and I couldn't help myself." As she gave her speech she backed to the library doors. She was more than a little surprised when she felt the press of hard wood against her back.

"Are you certain?" Damon asked.

"We'd be very gentle with you," Alaric promised.

"And we'd only drink a little of your blood."

She fumbled behind her back for the doorknob, too terrified to take her eyes off them, too terrified to do anything but get out of there. When she finally found the knob, it took her three tries to pull the door open. But when she did, she apologized one last time and ran.

As she made her way down the hall, she heard male laughter echoing in the library behind her. She felt her face heat with embarrassment for the thousandth time this day and knew she was the biggest sucker. Of course they weren't going to bite her. Not after Raven had gone to so much trouble just to get her there. But she couldn't help playing the fool. So much had happened to her in one day, it wasn't bizarre that she was feeling more than a little emotional and flighty. Anyone in her position would.

After another long search when she'd managed to find the parlor, she was still smarting.

"Did you enjoy your time with Alaric?"

She spun around on her heels. To her vast surprise, Raven was seated in a corner of the parlor, staring up at the fresco of Apollo. The candlelight danced across his features as he spoke to her in a voice she had to strain to hear.

"Alaric?" she parroted like a fool.

"And Damon, or course. We cannot forget him. Nor can we forget how you accused me of playing the cad. You accuse me, then run off to bed another."

She gaped. "What?"

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

At first, she'd been too stunned to form a coherent response, but as his accusation sunk in, a slow anger replaced her surprise. "I didn't do anything with Alaric or Damon. Not that it's any of your business."

Raven got to his feet. In the dim candlelight with the shadows casting shades of darkness around the room, he seemed to loom larger than ever. "Is it like that now?"

"Raven...." She shook her head. He wasn't making any sense. He had said he'd come for her if she didn't return to the room in an hour, and it was true that more than an hour had passed, but if he'd come looking for her, why was he sitting in the parlor in near darkness? "Azriel?" Her voice was tentative, cautious.

Raven approached. "You know Azriel can't get in. At least not without us knowing. Don't try to change the subject."

Instinctively she took a step back. "Maybe you found a way around it. It was you, Azriel, who said the student can't outsmart the teacher."

He shrugged, as though he was becoming bored with this conversation and had better things to do. "True. But I'm not Azriel."

"Then who are you? I know you're not Raven."

"Do you, now?"

He advanced on her until she was flush against the wall. She was damned tired of retreating from men, but in this instance she really couldn't do anything but retreat. She didn't have a clear idea of what she was dealing with, and she didn't want to react emotionally. What she did know was that the man before her wasn't Raven. Raven was imposing, but he'd never been intimidating. This thing before her was intimidating.

"Run," he said in a hoarse voice, the rotting stench of his breath filling her nostrils.

She screamed.

He crushed her mouth with his hand so hard she bit into her lip. She fell back into the wall and slid toward the floor, damning herself for her weakness. He wrapped his arm around her waist and hefted her to her feet. In one move, he'd thrown her over his shoulder and started for the door. She kicked and punched, but it didn't do any good.

In three great steps, he was at the door. As he pulled it open, she heard footfalls on the stairs.

Raven, she thought. Raven will save me.

But already her captor was stepping out into the chill night air with her. The cold bit into her exposed skin, making gooseflesh break out along her body. She damned herself again for not finding a thicker, winter robe to wear instead of the sheer, thigh-

length robe she'd opted to put on.

"Raven!" she screamed.

But her captor carried her out to the street. He unceremoniously jerked her from his shoulder so she landed hard on her feet in the middle of the road.

"Master," she heard him say.

In the seconds it took him to bow, his entire body made a metamorphous that had her screaming again. The long dark hair that looked so like Raven's fell from his head in great clumps. The soft olive skin turned dry and rotten. The lean body withered, and as she watched, his sable eyes turned milky gray.

Not a ghoul. But what? A rogue?

Her legs wobbled for a moment, but through sheer force of will, she stayed on her feet. At least she had until she heard the voice speak behind her.

"Charity," it said.

Over her captor's shoulder, she saw a red head appear in the doorway to Alaric's house. Aliceanna, then Alaric and Damon. Myrddin appeared. Then Raven was there, pushing his way past them and onto the front steps.

"Raven!" she called again.

Raven started forward, then stopped in his tracks. He stared.

She felt strong arms close around her, enveloping her.

"One step and I'll hurt her," Azriel said from behind her.

"You need her," Raven countered.

Azriel tightened his hold. His strength was immovable but still she kicked and tried to scratch his forearms. She opened her mouth to scream again, but he clamped a hand over her lips.

He chuckled. "Try me, Raven."

Raven didn't move.

To Charity, he said, "Now you're mine."

*Raven, help me*, she thought.

"He can't save you. Nobody can save you from me."

Turning her head, she looked up into Azriel's face. His grin was arrogant, his eyes glimmered with triumph.

Anger bubbled within her. It grew so fast, so unexpectedly hot that it nearly overwhelmed her. Fury at years of mistreatment, anger at Troy, at Azriel, and every man who'd handled her as though she were a pretty piece of fluff, made her see red.

She spun on Azriel, the movement so quick he didn't have time to react. "Go to hell," she screamed, then, with strength she didn't know she had, she set her hands between their bodies and shoved.

Azriel's eyes widened, then he was flying backward through the air. He landed at the edge of the street with a *thud*.

Blinded by rage, she ran toward him. "I'm not a pawn in your war." She swung her arm to the left, visualizing his body flying to the side of the road. She didn't stop running when he rose into the air, didn't stop shouting when his body slammed into a tree. "I'm not weak!" She swung her arm to the right, nearly smiled when the demon was thrown to the opposite side of the street. "And I won't be an innocent bystander

anymore.”

She would have kept going, kept shouting, but two arms came around her and lifted her off the ground. “That’s enough, Charity.”

Panting and furious, she struggled in his grasp.

“You fucked her,” Azriel roared, already on his feet. “It’s forbidden.”

“So is your presence on earth, but that didn’t stop you,” Raven shouted back.

“You fucked her,” Azriel said again, clearly dumbfounded.

“I did.”

Charity felt the arms pinioning her hands to her sides loosen, felt her feet touch the ground. Raven stepped from behind her and walked to her side. For the first time since he’d snatched her from her wedding, she knew the game had changed. She wasn’t the damsel in distress anymore, but an ally.

Setting his hands on his hips, Raven smiled. “If you want her, Azriel, come and get her. I dare you.”

Azriel stood on the edge of the street, eyes narrowed with fury. He was panting heavily, his hands clenched into tight fists at his side.

“She’s as strong as we are,” Raven said, conversationally.

“Only for a while.”

Raven shrugged. “I guess I’ll just have to keep on fucking her then, won’t I.”

Azriel’s fists rose, then dropped. The air began to swell. Cool air drifted past Charity’s legs and swirled around Azriel. As she watched, his wings spread wide and began to flap. “This isn’t over yet, old friend. I may not be able to get the girl, but I’m still on the earth. You can’t change that.”

“No, I can’t. But we’ll be ready for you next time.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Slowly, still glaring at them, he rose into the air. Within seconds he’d disappeared from view.

Charity turned to Raven and exhaled. “I don’t know what happened. I didn’t know I could do that. I was just so mad.”

“Alicenna was right. It wasn’t my place to keep you helpless. You have a right to protect yourself.” He slid an arm around her waist and led her back toward the house where the others were gathered on the front lawn, staring at them.

“Will you be leaving now, Raven?”

Raven shook his head. “Not as long as Azriel is here. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

And as she made her way across the lawn, up the front steps, and into the house, she smiled. “I think my strength is waning. We should go up to our room, make love again, just to be sure I stay strong. Know what I mean?”

Raven smiled. “If you insist.”

The End