**Angel-Claimed**

**ONE**

Sajia woke to the acrid stink of fear. Her nightgown clung to her body, wet with sweat. Or perhaps from the fog creeping in off the San Francisco Bay as night battled with day, streaking the sky with hints of color.

The chill she felt at seeing the drapes pulled back and the window open pebbled her skin in a way the cold didn’t. Though she now lived in a mansion guarded by vampires and their servants, old habits remained, as did a human’s inherent fear of the night and predators that roamed it.

She’d shut drapes and window alike before going to bed. It was a habit drilled into children from the moment they were old enough, mobile enough, to unlock a window and die as a result of it.

Sajia rubbed her chest as though she could slow the thundering beat of her heart. She tried to shake off the fear-smell, but it clung like a heavy shroud, making her think it belonged to her until movement, a nervous fluttering at the doorway, jerked her from a terror that had only recently crept its way into her life with each awakening.

She saw the blood-slave then, and dread descended, as thick and heavy as the fog outside. The girl was pale, wringing her hands, frightened that she would lose her life because of something others had done.

There was only one reason a blood-slave would come for her, and it jerked Sajia from the bed. “Corinne?” she asked, naming the scion she’d only recently become companion to.

“It’s not my place to say,” the girl whispered. “The Master demands your presence.”

There were many masters in the Tucci household, but only one by that name.

The blood-slave continued to hover in the doorway, trembling like a field mouse. Afraid to be in the presence of anyone who might draw The Master’s ire, afraid too that when the audience was done, she’d be the one called to The Master’s bed and bled dry.

Sajia offered no reassurance. Anything she said in an effort to comfort the girl would be a lie.

She stripped the damp nightgown from her body, tossing it onto the bed and dressing quickly. Supple black pants molded to her legs. A sleeveless shirt in swirling earth tones of yellow and brown and green left her arms bare, revealing the marks carved into her upper arm, pale, freshly healed symbols identifying her position and indicating she served the Tucci family.

She pulled soft, short boots on last, and the blood-slave turned without a word, scurrying down the hallway as if wanting to put as much distance as possible between her fate and Sajia’s.

Sajia followed. Despite the worry for Corinne that tied her stomach in knots, her steps sounded confident against the tile floor. Her footfalls echoed off the unadorned walls, their stark white surfaces a reminder of a servant’s place where the rest of the estate was lavishly decorated. A manifestation of power and wealth, though compared to the Tassone and many of the other vampire families, the Tucci were paupers.

The moment Sajia passed from the servants’ living area, two vampires positioned themselves behind her, trailing her to The Master’s parlor like deadly shadows.

Additional vampires waited outside that room. And more inside, a mix of inner-circle guards and family members.

No one spoke. No one moved. Yet Sajia felt their presence against her skin in a frigid blast, like a grave opened to reveal icy horror.

The Master sat behind his desk, caught forever at the age of thirty-five, his pockmarked face a testament to a time when vaccines didn’t exist and bleeding by leeches was a common treatment.

Whatever name he’d gone by then, at his death and rebirth he’d shed it like a snake does its skin. What the vampires called him privately, beyond Sire, she didn’t know. The humans knew only one word for him. Master.

Even fearing something had happened to Corinne, Sajia didn’t blurt out a question. She bowed her head and waited for The Master to speak first, forced any hint of rebellion deep inside herself at the required subservience.

She knew her place. It was well defined in a world forever changed by a long-ago war that decimated human populations and crushed nations, then was thrust into years of violent anarchy after the supernaturals made their existence known.

Peace, of a sort, had finally come with the carving up of territories. In San Francisco, vampires ruled. Absolutely.

They were apex predators. And humans, little more than cattle to be counted by the head instead of as individuals.

And I am one of those cattle, Sajia told herself, resisting the urge to touch the small gold scorpion at the base of her throat—a talisman and the only thing she possessed that belonged to parents she had no memory of, a reminder that she’d chosen to remain in servitude rather than leave San Francisco. No human beyond their childhood was allowed to live in the city unless they were found to be useful to the vampires. She didn’t want to move away from the aunt and uncle who’d raised her after her mother and father perished in a fire in the San Joaquin, or from the cousins who were like brothers and sisters.

Becoming bajaran, confidant to the still-human scion of a vampire family, not only allowed her to remain in San Francisco but also put her in a position to intercede on behalf of her own family if they needed help. It came with significant risks to them and to her, though even from the start it had been more than a role taken for benefit.

She’d liked Corinne from the moment they met by chance on the pier, and had come to worry for her future. But then that was the point of providing scions with bajaran, so there would be a trusted human in place should they survive their transition to vampire.

Finally The Master broke the silence, perhaps convinced she harbored no guilt, since she hadn’t gone to her knees and confessed in an effort to save herself. “Did Corinne tell you arrangements have been finalized for her to be sent to Los Angeles?”

An ache seized Sajia with the thought of being torn from her family. “No, she didn’t tell me.”

“She is to produce children with a Gairden scion.”

Fear on Corinne’s behalf tightened the knot of worry in Sajia’s belly. The Tucci blood was weak, though it would be suicide for her to speak those words out loud.

Not all families produced readily viable scions, genetically related children who would survive their transition. The Master decided when it was time to attempt it. Corinne’s biological mother and father both died in their transition, as did two older brothers and a couple of cousins.

Given that there were other still-human scions of the Tucci family and that The Master valued male children far more than he valued female ones, it was easy to imagine the worst, that the Gairden blood was so much weaker that they’d paid well to infuse their line with Tucci blood.

Sajia kept her head bowed, knowing there had to be more or she wouldn’t be standing before The Master in a roomful of vampires.

“Corinne has a boyfriend? A lover?”

Caution fanned into existence. “I don’t know of one.”

She suspected a budding romance. Corinne was at the age to dream of love and a future of her own making rather than accepting the reality of a fate orchestrated for her by The Master.

Let her have this time, Sajia had thought, not pushing for answers these past weeks, and now barely suppressing a shiver at how quickly secrets could turn deadly.

Being bajaran meant walking a fine line between loyalty to the individual and loyalty to the family. Betrayal meant death. Or worse. And with vampires, there were so many things worse than death.

Honor, in the style of omerta, from the days when humans ruled and mafia families held power, was a thing the vampires embraced as if they’d created the concept.

Perhaps they had. They’d been around since the dawn of creation. Or so she’d been told, though she’d never been allowed into the private libraries. Never read the histories where they were central figures.

“Recently you’ve spent a great deal of time at the occult shop,” The Master said. “Why?”

“Corinne has an interest in such things. I’ve accompanied her there.”

“And taken note of what she’s studied?”

“There’s been nothing in particular.”

“She has not been interested in charms or spells that might conceal her whereabouts?”

Sajia knew then, though she wouldn’t have thought there was a spell or charm powerful enough to hide a scion from being tracked by the vampire family she belonged to.

“Corinne is missing,” she said, daring to lift her head and meet The Master’s eyes because only by doing so could she convey that she was unafraid of what he would find if he seized her mind.

It was a boldness born of desperation. If he answered her challenge and discovered the periods where she blacked out, coming back to herself sometimes in locations she had no memory of going to, she’d die tonight, in this room.

The scorpion-shaped charm at Sajia’s neck felt warm against the cold of the moment and the icy precipice she stood on. Her shirt clung to her skin as her nightgown had earlier. And her heart beat furiously against her chest.

They would smell her fear, hear the thundering race of her pulse, but they would also expect it. Though she had nothing to do with Corinne’s disappearance, she wouldn’t escape punishment because of it. As bajaran she was responsible for Corinne’s well-being. It remained her duty to know Corinne well enough to anticipate her actions and keep her safe from the impulses and ill-conceived plans of youth.

Like prey transfixed by a serpent’s stare, Sajia continued to meet The Master’s gaze. A subtle shift, perception rather than true movement, told her the danger of having her mind invaded had passed. Taking a bajaran’s oath protected her from it unless there was reason to suspect betrayal. But he was The Master and no one would challenge his actions.

He steepled his hands and rested them on his chest, letting the tension build until it once again became evident that guilt or fear wouldn’t compel her to offer additional information. Finally he acknowledged, “Corinne is missing. She was taken to Oakland, though all that remained in the memory of the fisherman who piloted the boat is Corinne’s face and a vague recollection of a charm he passed to her before she hid herself under his nets.”

At the flexing of The Master’s fingers, the wall of vampires near the doorway parted to reveal the naked form of a man. The skin on his face and hands was deeply tanned from spending his days on the water.

It took only a glance for Sajia to know he was dead, drained of blood. The bite marks on his flesh were ragged and unhealed.

He’d been questioned and killed elsewhere. His body washed to rid it of the urine and feces that had come at death, if not before, so as not to offend The Master when the corpse was brought into his presence.

Sajia allowed no pity to show, though she felt a glimmer of it. Only a man driven to desperation would come to San Francisco on business not sanctioned by the vampires. Or a greedy fool.

She looked away from the corpse. Understanding it for the message it was, that it could just as easily be her, or one of her family members.

“With your permission,” she said, “I’ll leave to begin searching for Corinne.”

ADDAI STOOD NAKED on a snowy ledge high in the Sierras. White wings spread out on either side of him as if to catch the howling, frigid wind and use it to lift upward in glorious flight. Long black hair streamed and whipped at his back like a satin cape.

He was impervious to the temperature, uncaring of air traveling fast enough to become a multitude of icy needles. What was cold to a being with origins in the dark of endless space and unfathomable universe? To a being who was the essence of light, born of the essence of power? A favored creation until the one humans named a god decided to breathe life into mud and lay claim to this planet.

And so it had begun.

The defeat of the Djinn who’d called this world theirs.

The birth of envy and betrayal. Of temptation, and lust grown into love.

Lucifer’s challenge and the casting out of his followers.

A second angelic fall.

The slaughter of mortal and Djinn wives, of angel-sired children.

Followed by the deluge, a flood to further cleanse the world, though such a cleansing proved an impossible feat.

All of it spanning his existence, though in thousands of years he had become something different than he once was, the reason for the change embodied in a name.

Sajia.

Djinn. Long-ago enemy.

He’d found her drawing water from a village well, her family in the distance, loading trade goods onto camels. He’d meant to kill her first and move on to the others, but instead it was his own sense of purpose that had died in the face of her fear, in the mirror she became as she backed away, water jugs shattering as they fell from trembling fingers, her soul calling to his, weeping and making his own cry at the thought of her loss.

In the desert they’d become lovers, husband and wife. His fear of becoming Fallen had kept him from tying his fate to hers and irrevocably making this world his own.

A fist of pain formed around his heart as he remembered sharing a last, lingering kiss before lifting her onto a camel’s back, and how he’d fought the urge to go after her as she rode away with her family, all of them answering the summons of The Prince who ruled them.

He’d turned away, not yet ready to bind himself so thoroughly to her that the gathered Djinn would accept him among them as ally and not enemy. But some part of her spirit already lived in him. He’d felt the moment of her death in a searing blaze of agony that opened a chasm of emptiness in his soul. One that filled with terrible rage and hate when he went to the place where the Djinn had gathered and found Sajia’s lifeless body among those of her family members.

With a sweep of snowy wings he shook off the nightmares of the past, forging the emotion they brought with them into formidable determination. After thousands of years she was reborn, and soon she would be returned to him.

Iyar en Batrael, the most powerful Djinn of the Raven House, had gone to the fiery birthplace of his kind and called Sajia’s name. Though she would hold no memories of her previous life, it didn’t matter to Addai. She was his to love and possess, to forever protect from harm and keep safe even as a new war loomed—one heralding the return of the Djinn from their prison-paradise deep in the ghostlands.

Addai looked down at the chalet built when humans still possessed the technology to achieve such a feat, in the time before what they called The Last War. Then beyond it, at a sweeping vista of desolation.

Not the ruins caused by bombs, but the harsh lands given birth by Earth itself. Rugged, barren mountains covered in snow. And at their base, flatlands where water was scarce and survival a challenge, even in the days when humans ruled the world.

He would bring her here first. He, who could allow a millennium to pass without clothing himself in flesh, who could close his eyes in rest and wake to the dawning of a new era, now counted the hours, the days. Chafed in impatience at the demands of heart and soul to be reunited with Sajia, at the demands of the body to have her beneath him, legs splayed and arms clasping him to her as she welcomed him deep inside her.

His eyelids lowered as images of the past returned. Despite bearing the mark of the Scorpion House on her skin, she’d been so very, very submissive. He had but to walk into the tent and she would kneel before him, naked as he’d demanded she be in the privacy of their quarters.

Head bowed and long tresses a silky curtain flowing over her breasts, she’d been the picture of perfection. She’d enticed him with the feminine line of her spine and the sweet curve of her buttocks, her thighs parted slightly in subtle invitation, in subtle defiance. The sight of her that way never failed to harden him instantly, even when it was one held only in his memory.

Desire coursed through Addai and he took himself in hand. He would bring her here first and tend to her every need himself.

In the future, after they were bound by the incantations of his kind and the spirit-sharing of hers, then if she desired it he would surround her with servants to do her bidding, except in the most private part of their home. There she would wear nothing against her skin and be seen only by him.

He would guard her as he’d been unable to do in their previous life together. Perhaps insist that outside the home she wear abaya and niqāb so no man could look on her figure or her face and see what was his alone.

Addai’s hand tightened around his hardened cock with thoughts of covering Sajia’s body with his own. Desire burned through him, fire in veins of ice, scorching heat in a being capable of delivering merciless punishment and eternal agony.

There would be no physical release until Sajia was returned to him. Not with a woman and not by his own hand. Only she would satisfy him. No other.

He let himself imagine their first meeting. It was a favorite fantasy of his.

There’d be fear when she saw him, as there had been before. Instinctual on her part, especially if she’d been raised in this world instead of the Djinn kingdom and hadn’t been told she was his reward, the price for his doing the things he’d done on behalf of her kind.

Some part of her would recognize him as her natural enemy even with his wings hidden and his essence wrapped in the flesh of a mortal. But that fear would soon become an erotic one. And the desire to flee would yield to an addiction to the forbidden, to a craving for carnal punishment and complete surrender.

She would soon hasten into his presence, growing wet and ready as she went to her knees before him, hands clasped behind her back, long black hair caressing smooth buttocks as she looked up at him, offering a silent pleading for him to allow her to worship him with her mouth.

A shudder of need went through Addai, a measure of control was lost. The fingers wrapped around his cock moved up and down, delivering pleasure until the psychic touch of the creation bond announced the imminent arrival of one of his brothers.

With a thought Addai clothed himself in black pants, leaving his feet and torso bare. He leapt from the precipice, wings slicing through the wind as though it didn’t exist, allowing the cold air to do what his will could not, subdue the hard evidence of desire and hide the nature of his contemplations.

He landed on a snow-covered balcony. An instant later Tir appeared and the reason for his presence became obvious when the Djinn, Irial, materialized next to him. Though they were allied, without Tir to serve as guide, Irial wouldn’t easily have found the chalet.

Addai’s heart pounded in anticipation at seeing the eldest son and favored messenger of Iyar en Batrael. Every muscle tightened as pride warred with the desperate desire to ask the question never far from his mind. Where is she?

Irial wore the mark of the Raven House on his cheek like a stylized tattoo. Wings and talons outstretched, the bird was a symbol of what Irial and those like him were capable of—guiding a Djinn soul back for rebirth.

The snow melted beneath Irial’s feet in a slowly widening circle, a showy reminder that the Djinn were creatures of fire. Wicked amusement danced in the Raven prince’s eyes like a wild flame set in the midst of a green forest, setting Addai’s teeth on edge and making him struggle against lifting his hand and calling his sword from its sheath of air and hidden reality.

Irial’s teeth flashed white in his deeply tanned face, goading Addai, daring him to break the silence and ask what message he’d brought.

“Tell me,” Addai said, willing to cede that much of a victory to Irial, satisfied in knowing the prince of the Raven House would one day be brought to his knees by a match arranged for him to serve the purpose of seeing the Djinn returned to Earth.

“My father sends word. He wants you to know the reward promised is now yours to claim. He says you will recognize it when you see it, but cautions you to remember all things are part of the weave, including this.”

“Where?” Addai asked, refusing to name Sajia it or to reveal her existence to either Irial or Tir.

“Your prize is in San Francisco. Or will be shortly. In the occult shop protected by the Tassone sigil.”

**TWO**

Sajia girded herself to approach the threshold of the occult shop. No other description of the effort fit as well.

It’d been like this from the very first visit she’d made with Corinne. Not just a sensitivity to magic, but a deep aversion to it.

Sweat ran down her back. And already her stomach roiled, leaving her fighting to suppress a violent spew of vomit, as if her soul would flee any way it could.

She smoothed slick palms over her pants and forced herself forward.

A step.

Two.

Her lungs constricted, as if squeezed by a giant fist to force the air out. She barely stifled a gasp. Another step and the Tassone mark was clearly visible, etched in the glass next to the door: a serpent with an apple in its mouth, the three segments of its S-shaped body impaled by an arrow that ran from a point behind the head to just before the tip of its tail.

Unlike in Oakland, the city across the bay, there were no bars covering the glass, no shutters of solid wood or steel to keep someone from breaking in during the day, or guard against the things that roamed the night. The Tassone symbol alone was enough protection.

Sajia resisted the urge to touch the knives she wore at her hips. Except in practice she’d never had to pull them since becoming bajaran. The recently carved symbols on her arm served as a deterrent to trouble.

She wondered if that would remain true when she crossed to Oakland. Unlike San Francisco, that city was controlled by humans, many of whom would gladly rid the world of anything touched by the supernatural.

Those humans with gifts were required to live in a certain area of town, outside of the one patrolled by guardsmen and police. Their houses were marked, identifying the nature of their talents.

Beyond the area set aside for them lay the red zone, a place where vice thrived and the lords who controlled it enforced their own set of laws. Brothels lined the streets, human as well as the ones housing shapeshifters not welcome in the lands controlled by the Were. Gambling clubs and opium dens were common, as were private gathering places where humans could indulge in whatever amused them.

Oakland was a port city. But even without the visiting sailors and merchants, there was plenty of business for the red zone. And that’s where Sajia feared she’d find Corinne. She couldn’t imagine one of the gifted sheltering a vampire scion, or one of the law-abiding.

Given the fisherman’s corpse, she didn’t think she’d find Corinne’s trail by going to the docks. Which left the occult shop as a starting point.

Forcing air into lungs that fought against expanding sent a spasm of pain through Sajia’s chest as she opened the door and stepped into the shop. It smelled of books and incense, scents she usually found pleasing, relaxing.

Not today. And never here.

She made her way to the counter. The man behind it looked up at her approach.

He was a stranger to her, gray-skinned and balding, cadaverous in appearance. His fingertips and lips blackened from ink.

Choice stood in front of her. Honor played a role in vampire society, and with it came the concept of saving face.

She could ask about Corinne directly, inquiring as to what, if anything, he might have seen while her charge was in the shop. The scarring on her arm gave her the right to those answers. Or she could ask about the token, hoping that finding its source might lead to where Corinne was hiding. She couldn’t do both.

If she survived this and found Corinne unharmed from her adventure, she’d prefer not to suffer additional punishment because she’d confirmed, by use of a name, that a scion had slipped away from the Tucci estate, in all likelihood because of a betrothal.

Sajia chose the latter, and though she’d been raised in a vampire-controlled city, the word master still tasted vile on her tongue. She forced herself to use it anyway, to evoke what courtesy might be extended to the Tucci family.

“I’m inquiring on behalf of one of my masters,” she said, “trying to find out the name of someone skilled enough in the use of magic to create a token allowing a human with blood obligations to hide.”

The clerk’s lips pulled back. Smile or grimace or show of distaste, it tightened his skin and accentuated the shape of his skull. “Visit the Wainwright witches for that answer. You’ll find them in Oakland. But be prepared to pay for the information. Nothing comes without cost where they’re concerned.”

Sajia thanked him and turned away from the counter just as a man entered the shop. At the sight of him her heart flip-flopped in her chest, seeming to stop and then race forward in wild abandon, torn between fear and desire.

He was mesmerizing. The face of a god—

Or a fallen angel like those painted on canvas, created in the imaginations of artists who’d lived well before mankind developed the technology to destroy the world.

Black hair and equally black irises. Carved perfection and carnal sin.

She wet her lips without being aware of it until his gaze dropped to them, hungry and fierce and commanding.

“Sajia,” he said, her name turned into a caress, into images of naked bodies stretched out on silky sheets, lips and hands exploring without inhibition, mesmerizing her until she forced the erotic pictures from her mind.

How he knew her name, she didn’t know. But unless he’d been sent by The Master to assist her, she had no time for him.

He blocked her exit, leaving her no choice other than to approach him. Sajia stepped forward, fear and desire both trying to cloud her thoughts and narrow her reality until it contained only him.

The rush of emotion nearly drove Addai to his knees. Thousands of years hadn’t prepared him for the reality of this moment.

Sajia. It was as though she’d stepped out of the past, her form and face exactly as he remembered them, her soul calling to his in haunting song and the promise of ecstasy.

How the Djinn had managed it, he didn’t know and didn’t care. All that mattered was that she’d been returned to him.

Despite his fantasies of their first meeting, he felt no disappointment at the quick pass of fear from her eyes. The desire he saw in her expression, and sensed like a heated stroke along the length of his body, more than satisfied him.

His thoughts flashed ahead, mentally enfolding her in arms and wings and willing them to the mountain home he’d prepared for her. He reached out, expecting her to take his hand. “Come.”

Denial flashed through her eyes, exciting him until fantasy and reality collided with a single question. “Did The Master send you?”

A blink. A full opening of his senses and Addai recoiled in horror. She was human. Worse if the purposeful scarring of her arm read true. A servant bound to vampires.

Rage whipped through him at the betrayal—the same black abyss of fury that had once led him to send his brother into a slavery lasting thousands of years. And yet even in his fury, desire overrode revulsion and the call of her spirit to his had him grabbing her bare wrist and jerking her closer.

She reacted instantly, drawing a knife he hadn’t bothered noting and pressing it to his belly as if she’d gut him where he stood. His cock responded with a hard throb. His body accepting, craving her even as his mind rebelled.

The blade tip slid through the thin shirt he’d willed into existence, breaking skin. And the release of his blood undid a masking spell, revealed the ice blue sigils scrawled across her forehead like a thorn crown, and around her wrists like manacles. Angelic symbols of binding not visible to any mortal. A script placed there by one of his kind, the power necessary to turn flesh into a living prison the telltale signature of only one ally working with the Djinn.

Addai’s heart sang. She wasn’t human as he’d thought seconds before, but Djinn trapped in a human form, returned to him as promised.

His eyes noted it then, the thin, tight chain worn around her neck like a collar. Sigils etched into the gold and holding knowledge he could only guess at, the pendant, scorpion shaped. The mark of her Djinn House and symbol of a protector. The identification of her soul’s nature.

“Release me,” she said.

Never. But he held the words and complied only so he could better take her measure.

“Did The Master send you?” she asked again.

He fought the pulling back of his lips in a savage smile promising retribution. She would call no one else master. Only him.

Addai glanced at the scarring on her arm and recognized the sigil as a farmer recognizes a dung beetle before stepping on it. Tucci.

Not allies.

Yet, the voice of reason managing to suppress his urge to kill.

If he was to achieve his goal, seeing the return of the Djinn and the control of this world taken so he could live openly with Sajia and know their children would be safe, then he couldn’t afford war on another front, especially with vampires.

Addai suppressed a curse as the message delivered by Irial, the reminder from Iyar en Batrael that all things were part of the weave, took on new meaning.

Sajia would be a foundling placed in the world. Delivered into the hands of humans and her reality shaped by them, her loyalty given to them—and worse, to a vampire scion.

“I’m here for you,” he said, an ambiguous answer.

She frowned in response but drew the knife away from his skin. His testicles pulled tight in protest at the loss of contact, in anticipation of reclaiming it.

Once fear had served as challenge and erotic excitement. But now he found implied violence had the same effect.

She would submit. She would find pleasure in calling him master.

“Shall we go?” he asked, eyes flicking in the direction of the counter and the man behind it.

She sheathed the knife. “Yes.”

They left the shop and though she tried to hide her weakness, he was so finely attuned to her that he caught the sigh of relief and the subtle relaxing of her body. Magic of the kind found in the occult shop was anathema to the Djinn. Few could work it, and many found it sickening to be in its presence.

A few steps away she stopped and turned to him, hands resting on the hilts of her knives.

He smiled in challenge, daring her to pull them from their sheaths.

“Has Corinne been found?”

Addai made the connection immediately, between the question and Sajia’s position as bajaran. His smile faded to a frown, and his amusement flashed to irritation at seeing an inevitable delay before he could take her to his bed.

“No.”

“Then why am I being summoned back to the estate?”

“Did I say as much? I said only that I am here for you. And I am. Did you discover anything useful at the shop?”

“I’ve never seen you before.”

He shrugged. “I am Addai.”

“I don’t know that name. Prove you serve the Tuccis.”

His smile returned, as sharp as one of her knives. He’d spent no time among the Tucci, but it was his business to know the lineage of all the vampire families in San Francisco. Even without the prospect of alliance, he would have gathered the information. Like the Djinn, vampires were natural enemies, but unlike the Djinn, the origin of their conflict began elsewhere, on a long-dead planet light-years away.

Dismissing the threat of Sajia’s weapons, Addai placed his hands on her waist to prevent her from taking a step backward. It was torment and paradise at the same time to feel her beneath his palms.

He leaned forward, mouth drawing close to hers as if to share a secret, though his intent was to claim a taste of what belonged to him. “Sajia,” he whispered, touching his lips to hers, sharing breath and life and spirit, as was the Djinn way, as had been their way so many thousands of years ago.

She resisted, clamping her jaw shut and firming her mouth against his invasion. Had she remembered him, she would have known denying him was a dangerous game.

One of his hands settled on her back and forced her forward, flush against his body. The other slid upward, covering her breast possessively.

“Fight all you want,” he murmured against her mouth, the hand at her breast leaving to grasp her long braid, wrapping it around fingers and wrist, a taut leash preventing her from moving her head. “It will only make my victory sweeter and your surrender more satisfying.”

She started to pull her knives and he laughed, the hand on her back sliding lower, caressing her buttocks, holding her in place as he ground against her mound, against the clit he knew would be swollen and erect given the heady scent of feminine arousal that filled his nostrils.

A small moan signaled her yielding and he took advantage of it, thrusting his tongue into her mouth in an unbridled claiming.

Desire nearly overrode restraint as she responded, twining her tongue with his, rubbing. Meeting thrust for thrust in a challenge that could only end one way, with his cock deep in her body, stretching her, filling her in shared pleasure and the release of seed.

The air around them shimmered. The will keeping him human in appearance threatened to give way in the spread of wings and radiance.

Only a small sliver of rational thought kept him from doing it. There were too many people present on the street and no way to strip the memory of what they’d seen from all of their minds, when leaving it risked that one of his kind would stumble upon the image and know of Sajia.

It was agony to end the kiss. Addai managed it only by telling himself that soon she’d be home, naked in the place he’d had built for them.

She would know the truth of what she was to him then. Wife. Mate.

His in every way.

Only his.

“You want proof,” he said, forced to pragmatism by the presence of so many witnesses. Returning to her earlier question so they could get done with this business of looking for her missing charge rather than waste time doing battle over it. “Ask me something about the Tucci, something only a human well acquainted with them would know.”

“Name the youngest, and the most recently transformed vampire of the Tucci line.”

Addai laughed. “Ah, a trick question given the majority of scions die during their transformation and a great number of those passed off as Tucci descendants are favored humans with no genetic link. To hedge my bets I’ll give you three names to prove I know the different ways your question might be answered. Demas is the most recent addition to the Tucci family, though he is not a true descendant regardless of claims to the contrary. Euan is related by blood and the youngest if measured in total years of existence, while Ilario, who survived the change five years ago, is older chronologically but the most recently transformed vampire bearing Tucci genes. Satisfied?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then let’s be on our way. What did you intend after leaving here?”

“To go to Oakland. That’s where I believe Corinne is. If I can find out who made the token hiding her from the Tuccis, it might lead me to her. The clerk suggested I visit the Wainwright witches for answers. They’re my first stop.”

“Excellent,” Addai said, pleasure purring through him at the mention of an ally powerful enough to speed this nuisance business of a missing vampire scion to its conclusion.

Sajia escaped Addai’s arms and hurried toward the car she’d taken from the Tucci estate, and Mario, the driver who was both friend and family member. With each step she told herself she couldn’t afford to be distracted or delayed. But even as she hastened to put as much distance as possible between herself and Addai, traitorous heat curled through her with the remembered imprint of his body to hers and the intensity of the desire that had poured into her with his touch.

Mario stood next to the back door, waiting to open it for her. He was stiffly formal in his uniform, the lines of his face smooth in an attempt to avoid any expression, though she saw the worry in his eyes. Guessed he recognized Addai and wanted to warn her against involvement with him—not just for her sake, but for all of theirs.

If not for Addai, she would have opened the door for herself and climbed into the front seat. Mario’s sister was married to one of her cousins, and expecting a child.

Sajia got into the back, Addai sliding in next to her, crowding her, making it difficult to think about anything else but him. Any lingering doubt about his belonging to the Tuccis was banished by how quickly Mario obeyed Addai’s command, delivering them to the area set aside for the gifted then departing afterward rather than wait.

At first sight of the witches’ home Sajia nearly balked at going any farther. It sat squat and dark, windows glistening as the sunlight struck them, like malevolent eyes looking out on the world. The hair rose on her arms and neck, and she wondered if she’d feel the same nearly unbearable sensations that she had experienced when she entered the occult shop.

Her mouth went dry. The clerk’s words about the cost of dealing with the witches whispered through her mind in ominous warning.

Looking at their house, the sigil-inscribed doorway with its gargoyle-head knocker, the wrought iron fence with its etched warnings, she could well believe anything to be found here entailed a great deal of peril. Danger not just in the form of death, but to the soul.

She glanced at the man next to her. Addai. His name resonated through her in a way that made no sense, as if some part of her recognized him and was determined to have him, regardless of the turmoil, the uncertainty caused by Corinne’s disappearance.

A shiver slid through Sajia, and it had nothing to do with the prospect of entering a place where magic was practiced. Her nipples pressed against the thin material of her shirt, and her channel clenched in hungry need.

She was no virgin, but she’d never had a lover like him. A man who would make the most physically attractive of the vampires appear plain, and the most powerful of them seem less than equal.

Confidence poured off Addai along with waves of heated sensuality. It seemed inconceivable that another vampire family, especially the Tassone, hadn’t claimed him first with promises of immense power and wealth and immortality.

She shied away from thinking about him risking the transition and not surviving it. He turned then, sensing her eyes on him. His smile sent her heart tripping. His gaze as it moved over her face in slow appreciation then downward to her breasts, had her struggling to breathe normally.

He laughed, a husky erotic sound that wound its way through her. Leaning in, he said, “There is nothing about you that escapes my notice. It pleases me to know you are as aroused in my presence as I am in yours.”

Sajia forced her attention back to the witches’ house, angry at herself for being distracted by him, for thinking about anything other than finding Corinne. For all she knew Addai had been sent to test both her resolve and her loyalty to her charge, to report back how diligently she carried out her responsibility, perhaps even to suggest to what extent she should suffer for her failures.

She took a step forward, determined to succeed. Closed her mind to worries about what the witches might ask in return for their aid.

Addai’s hand curled possessively around her upper arm. “No harm will come to you here,” he said, swinging open the gate and ushering her through the opening.

Stepping into the witches’ territory was like pushing through an unseen curtain of gossamer. It left the impression of clinging, invisible strands and made Sajia want to brush herself off.

At the door, Addai lifted the knocker, a brass ring held in the mouth of a gargoyle. Only a moment passed before his summons was answered by a handsome woman with a streak of silver along the part of black hair.

“Addai,” the witch said, and Sajia felt a surge of hope and relief. She wondered then if he’d been sent because The Master guessed this search would ultimately involve the Wainwright witches, and saved face by sending aid without the others knowing of it, since she had no power to negotiate on behalf of the Tuccis.

“I’m sure our appearance here is no surprise, Annalise,” Addai said, pitching his voice to hold a warning the witch couldn’t fail to hear in her mind and feel in her soul. Whatever power she held here on Earth, she was still human, and he, a being whose reach extended into the spiritlands. He’d played his part toward the return of the Djinn and the battle for control of this world that loomed, and would continue to play it, but there would be no interference, no further payment, not where Sajia was concerned.

He had no intention of allowing either witches or Djinn to draw Sajia into their web of intrigue and destiny. He was her destiny. She needed no other.

The witch showed no signs of fear. He didn’t expect it.

“This way,” Annalise said, turning and preceding them down the hallway. “You are correct. The matriarch anticipated your visit. It is fortuitous you came here sooner rather than later.”

Sajia’s curiosity brushed against Addai’s senses. And though this delay irritated him, it wasn’t without its compensations. He found himself enjoying the heated glances she cast in his direction when she thought he wasn’t looking, savoring the build of heat and anticipation, the exquisite agony of being near her but not yet inside her.

The matriarch waited in the parlor, a shrunken hull of flesh and bones dressed in black. An abomination of spirit that had him fighting the urge to call his sword even knowing that delivering physical death would free neither the Djinn nor the human soul now entangled and tethered to this life in a single frail body.

He guided Sajia to a small couch across from the matriarch. Filmy, opaque eyes settled on them as they sat, sightless from cataracts, though the witch hadn’t needed them to see in a long time.

“What do you know of Sajia’s missing charge?” he asked.

The witch’s attention shifted to Sajia. “So the rumors of the missing Tucci scion are true.”

“Yes,” Sajia answered. “Corinne was last seen getting on a boat. The fisherman piloting it brought her to Oakland after first giving her a charm capable of hiding her trail from The Master. But the man had no memory of who hired him or what happened afterward.”

“And now he is dead, drained of information and blood,” the matriarch said matter-of-factly. “Beyond your reach unless you ask the shamaness Aisling to bargain in the ghostlands. Though someone capable of creating such a token, and leaving no memory of themselves, probably has allies in the spiritlands and the ability to ensure nothing useful would be learned from the fisherman.”

“Do you know who would be capable of crafting such a spell and attaching it to a token?” Sajia asked.

“Besides those of my family? Yes. Maliq. He makes his home in the red zone and is known for his willingness to work even the darkest of magic if his price is met.”

The white-moon eyes returned to Addai, craterless orbs bringing a sense of foreboding. “It wouldn’t surprise me in the least to learn Maliq created the token, but if you’re successful in finding him, I think it’s likely you’ll discover he’s the pawn of another. I’ve heard your brother has turned his attention to the vampires and amuses himself by trying to set one family against another.”

Every muscle in Addai’s body went taut at the mention of his brother. He had scores of them, some allies and some enemies. But like a bored human schoolboy left alone on the playground and desperate to draw a favored companion back, only one brother passed his time with games in the way the matriarch alluded to.

Caphriel. Angel of the final apocalypse, as he himself had once been. Sharing purpose though their ways of delivering it differed, sharing a name that regardless of translation was always the same: Death.

Addai rose to his feet in a fluid movement of suppressed violence. Resolve pounded through him with each heartbeat, beginning and ending with one word. Sajia. With one thought. Take her to the chalet and keep her there, away from games involving vampires and safe from discovery by Caphriel.

He pulled Sajia from the couch, arms locking her to him.

She struggled, pushing and squirming, but against his strength she had no chance of escape.

“Cast a circle,” he told the matriarch. “Let one of the others engage Caphriel if this Tucci scion is of any importance. Sajia’s involvement with vampires is ended.”

A word from the old witch and a circle flared into existence, a writhing ring of power that would mask the unleashing of his own.

Addai relaxed his will and all semblance of being human fell away.

White wings spread out behind him, glorious light shimmering and bent into a physical form.

He enfolded Sajia in them, a brush of feathers against cloth and skin. And with a thought, he took her home.

**THREE**

Shocked disbelief held Sajia motionless. Her mind argued against the reality of Addai being an angel, a creature of myth and imagination, of his taking her from the witches’ house between one heartbeat and the next. She trembled, imprisoned and unresisting in steely arms and feathered wings until his last words, and the witch’s, arrowed their way into her consciousness, slicing through all other emotion and bringing with them a terrible fear, not just at the fate awaiting her family if she abandoned her oath, but that Corinne might be in danger instead of hiding.

Sajia struggled, pushing against Addai’s now-bare chest and trying desperately to get her hands free so she could grasp her knives.

His lips against her hair, he held her easily, as if her fight to get free barely registered and required little of his strength to subdue. “You have nothing to fear from me.”

“Then let me go,” she said, the words a repeat of what she’d told him in the occult shop.

His laugh was dark, possessive. “Never. But I will free you to look at your new home.”

She chilled as soft feathers fell away and he stepped back, leaving her standing in cool air and elegant splendor, in a room housing treasures older than any she’d seen in the Tucci estate.

Floor-to-ceiling windows defied the elements, daring them to rail against a structure that shouldn’t exist. Allowing for a view that drew her forward with its majesty, its harsh testament to the power of nature, snow-covered mountains and the near desert at their feet.

The sight made her breath catch, not just at the beauty but at how far they must be from San Francisco. “Where are we?”

“In the Sierras.”

Panic seized her. It was a fist around her heart that squeezed mercilessly, spearing pain through her chest and making her breathing erratic. “Take me back.”

“No.”

He prowled forward, a sensual menace reflected in the windows. She pulled her knives then, whirling to meet him.

“Why?” she asked, the question meant to encompass the entirety of his actions.

“Because you belong to me.”

It was said with complete belief. And though it galled her to consider herself property that could be passed on to another, she denied his claim. “The Master didn’t give me to you. He wouldn’t as long as Corinne is missing.”

Addai’s smile held the promise of death. “Think of any other male as your master and I will slay him.”

He lifted his hand and it was as if a tear appeared in reality, a sheath of air and light from which he drew a sword.

Cold menace radiated from both man and blade. In reaction her fists tightened around the hilts of her knives as she prepared to duck and lunge.

His smile became a snarl. “Do not fear that I will use my sword on you, Sajia. I would die before I let any harm come to you.”

His voice rang with truth, stunning her. Confusing her even as an insidious warmth spiraled through her. Desire reawakened. Awe that he could want her, care about her to such an extreme.

With the flick of his wrist the sword disappeared. He stepped forward, uncaring and unafraid of the blades she held. She stepped back, unwilling and unable to attack until he answered her.

His wings spread out behind him, bars of a feather-soft cage. His hands reached, but rather than try to disarm her, they settled against the glass behind her, trapping her at the expense of leaving himself vulnerable.

A dare? No. The arrogant curve of his lips spoke of utter confidence.

For a split second she was tempted to draw blood as she had in the occult shop. “Why me?” Sajia repeated.

Addai wanted to dismiss the question as easily as he’d dismissed the fate of the Tucci scion. Desire rode him and restraint threatened to fall away now that he had Sajia alone.

His earlier pragmatism and willingness to linger in Oakland were gone, washed away by hot lust and insatiable craving. Thousands of years of waiting had him nearly shaking with the need to have her lying beneath him, her bare skin and curves pressed to him, her legs open and her body welcoming his.

His gaze flicked to the scorpion-shaped pendant and he decided to answer the question, to tell her the truth, though not all of it. There would be time to tell her she wasn’t human. To unravel the angelic spell glowing in ice blue script on her flesh, to free her from it so she would be fully Djinn.

Once she’d been mārdazmā, able to change into another shape, though without a non-corporeal form. The need to bind her to a human form suggested that reborn she could shapeshift, though she might well have a higher caste’s ability to become little more than unseen particles.

Until he had her heart, her loyalty, her love, he couldn’t risk her knowing she had the ability to leave him, perhaps escape his reach altogether by discovering how to cross from this world to the Djinn kingdom deep in the ghostlands.

He dropped his hand from the window to cup her cheek, marveling at the heat of her skin, the features so perfectly re-created, so well loved and so often dreamed of. He stroked his thumb over soft, trembling lips. “I would die before I let any harm come to you because once you were my lover, my wife. I failed you in that life, and because of it you were killed, slain by my kind. I won’t fail you in this life, Sajia.”

Denial screamed through Sajia. What he claimed was impossible.

Yet on the heels of that came doubt. Before mankind had nearly destroyed the world, vampires and Weres were a thing of fiction and dark fantasy, and the ghostlands called Purgatory or Sheol, or something else depending on culture and belief. From the moment she’d first encountered Addai his name had resonated through her in a way that made no sense, as if some part of her recognized him and was determined to have him, regardless of the urgent need to find Corinne.

Corinne’s name was like a knife paring away everything unimportant. The past had no relevance, not now or in the immediate future.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, ill-conceived words she regretted the instant she saw Addai’s features tighten into a ruthless expression.

Hurriedly she tried to undo the damage and steer him toward reason. “I have no memories of our life together. Without them I’m not the same woman you knew.”

He crowded closer, wings pulling in and forward so they touched her arms in an erotic, feathery caress, a cocoon of sensual heat. His thumb brushed over her bottom lip again, sending a fresh wave of tingling desire downward through her body.

“We will make new memories, Sajia.”

Heat pooled in her belly and breasts. She couldn’t deny the desire she felt, doubted she could resist the temptation he posed, the allure of becoming his lover. But neither could she turn her back on her responsibilities, knowing what the cost of it would be.

“Then let the new memories begin with our finding Corinne.”

“No. One of the others will see to the task.”

His face lowered and she turned her head, avoiding the touch of his lips to hers. “Any help you’re willing to give or can arrange is appreciated, but I need to search as well. The Mas—”

Addai’s teeth closed on her earlobe in warning, a sharp bite that aroused rather than frightened, though the words following it were whispered menace. “I won’t issue another warning. Think of yourself as belonging to anyone else and you sign their death warrant. Your days of being around vampires are over. The marks on your arm will soon be gone and nothing will remain of your time with them.”

“No,” she said, fear making her pulse beat wildly in her throat, freeing her from the sexual thrall his presence evoked. “No. Even if Corinne is found by someone else, I took an oath. If I fail in my duties, then the punishment is mine alone. But if I betray the Tuccis or run away, then my family will pay for my transgressions.”

“I will see that your family is taken to another city and given everything they need to survive in it.”

“They have ties in San Francisco, lives there. Obligations to the vampires that aren’t easily set aside. And even if they did leave, can you guarantee their safety if I break my oath?”

She knew he couldn’t. Vampires were capable of pursuing vengeance over centuries. Some said their reach extended into the afterlife itself.

“As much as any human life can be safeguarded,” Addai said. “A blink of an eye in the span of eternity and millions of them are born, grow old, and pass from this world. Those you call family will die, Sajia, regardless of where they live. I won’t allow any chance of death taking you, not again. You are mine. You will remain here, out of danger.”

Cold truth and implacable will, his voice held no compassion, nothing other than resolve delivering a fate she couldn’t accept. A part of her wept even as she used the knives still in her hands, stabbed him in desperate reaction.

He danced backward rather than subduing and disarming her. Eyes glittered as blood streamed downward over perfect flesh. “If you remembered me, Sajia, then you would know this will only serve as foreplay.”

She crouched and moved sideways, away from the window, adrenaline spiking through her. Rational thought dominating in spite of the panic and fear.

Her only hope lay in changing his mind, not in defeating him physically. Only by demonstrating her determination and taking advantage of his earlier confession could she achieve it.

I would die before I let any harm come to you.

He came after her, arms held loosely at his sides and expression arrogant. Telling her without words that he didn’t need to call the sword he’d shown her earlier in order to defeat her.

“Surrender now, Sajia, and the penalty will be minimal. An early lesson in submission rather than the freedom to explore your new home I thought to allow while we became reacquainted.”

She didn’t respond to the taunt, didn’t back down when he lunged. She swung and missed, but the force of it conveyed the seriousness of her intent.

He laughed then feinted, playing with her, maneuvering her around the room. The wounds she’d inflicted with her knives had already healed, leaving only smears of blood over smooth skin.

She used the time to study her surroundings, looking for weapons and ways to escape.

Foreplay, he’d said, and she could see the truth of it. The front of his pants was tented by his hardened cock. His voice held no less evidence of arousal as he regaled her with what her lesson in submission would entail.

Kneeling naked and head bowed.

Remaining motionless and waiting for his touches as he spread them out, teaching her to crave them.

Hurrying to the bed when he finally ordered it and eagerly positioning herself so he could bind her wrists and ankles to the posts in symbolic acknowledgment of her total surrender.

Sajia found it too easy to imagine. He was sculpted perfection, a dark angel of carnal sin.

She couldn’t tell whether her traitorous heart beat more rapidly in anticipation of it or in fear of not being able to convince him of the need to return to Oakland.

He was in no hurry to catch her. If anything, he seemed to delight in the flex of his muscles, the folding and unfolding of his wings until she was driven to say, “You remind me of a male peacock.”

“An apt though perhaps unflattering description, for you are definitely the mate I intend to impress with my prowess. Put down your puny knives and after a suitable length of punishment I’ll let you handle something far more interesting.”

It was impossible not to laugh. She had no personal fear of him. How could she when desire coursed through her and she knew he would never hurt her?

But that didn’t diminish the tightness in her chest when her thoughts went to the fate of her family and her need to find Corinne. It didn’t lessen her resolve to return to Oakland.

Arrogant confidence made Addai careless. On their fourth circling pass around the living room, Sajia drifted backward, toward a door leading to a railless balcony she imagined served as a landing place when Addai chose to use his wings to fly rather than preen. As he’d stalked her, she’d been able to catch glimpses of what lay beneath and on either side of it, had discovered the house wasn’t perched on a sheer cliff, though the terrain below the balcony was steep and covered in rock and snow.

She’d mentally rehearsed her movements like a well-choreographed fight. There would be only one chance at victory.

A feint, as if she intended to make a running attack, had Addai backing up, hands beckoning, a come-and-get-me expression in place. If the stakes hadn’t been so high, she might well have answered him, determined to wipe the smug confidence from his face. Instead, she reached around her, opening the door and escaping the room.

The cold took her breath. It bit into her skin, battering against her in icy blasts until the urgency of her situation allowed her to block it out.

She moved to the balcony’s edge. Positioning herself close enough to jump and stand a chance of managing a handhold instead of hurtling downward in a bone-breaking rush that would only be interrupted if Addai took flight.

Addai followed, the amusement gone from his face and replaced by a terrible beauty. Enough, he said, lips that could call for adoration or herald damnation remaining closed as he spoke into her mind, demanded, Come to me.

Every cell in her body responded, trying to force her forward. His will was a cold lash of a whip across her soul, a thing of finely honed edges, carving away her own.

Come to me, he repeated, exerting more of his power.

She fought summons with summons, calling up the faces of her family members and seeing them being drained of blood, their bodies hung from the walls of the Tucci estate as a reminder to every human in San Francisco of the price to be paid for betraying an oath given to vampires. Calling up the image of Corinne and knowing she’d failed her.

The pendant Sajia wore grew hot, as if unseen, the parents who’d died in a fire aided her. Her skin burned where the scorpion lay against it, and the pain helped achieve what horrific imaginings alone couldn’t; it drove the sound of Addai’s voice from her mind.

He moved forward then, his expression ruthless, very nearly cruel. “Enough, Sajia. You won’t escape. Even if you are so foolish as to jump, I’ll merely retrieve you. What injuries you sustain can be easily healed. And tied to my bed you will soon forget why you ever wanted to leave.”

“If forgetting my family and my charge and my oath were that easy, I would be in your arms now.”

She took a small step backward, so she stood like a swimmer at the end of a diving board, with only the balls of her feet and toes keeping her on solid ground. “You might stop me this time, but what about the next? And the one after that? I would rather die attempting to get back to Oakland than live knowing I lay with you, finding pleasure while my family experienced only fear and suffering and death. Will you keep me a prisoner for all eternity, or end up killing me yourself when I grow to loathe you as much as I will myself?”

Her words encased Addai in ice. How well he knew the power hate and rage could wield. Standing among carnage and seeing her lifeless body had once filled him with those emotions. And what he’d done in the wake of her death made a vampire’s retribution seem merciful in comparison.

His gaze went to the pendant and he cursed it, guessing that it and it alone had thwarted his attempts to use his mind and his voice to bend her to his will. She was human in form, human in belief, and with that first breath forced into clay at the dawn of their creation, they’d inhaled a susceptibility to angelic influence.

Addai’s soul and body, heart and mind all screamed in protest at the thought of giving in to her demands. He would slaughter every Tucci, the scion Corinne included, if it meant Sajia would come to his bed willingly and accept the sheltered life he intended for her.

A primal scream welled up inside him, male frustration and the anguish of conflicting needs—to keep her safe from danger, yet find the scion and bargain with the Tuccis for Sajia’s release from her oath so they’d never again return to this argument.

The muscles of his arms stood out as he kept himself from lifting them. Were he not standing on the balcony of the home he’d had built for her, he would have raised a hand to the sky and brought forth a sword of retribution, using it to call down lightning and reduce the chalet to rubble and smoldering ash.

He would not leave Sajia here unguarded. Nor did he want to leave her with anyone else. She was too precious, too long away from him to bear parting from again, even temporarily.

“Promise you will not leave me to go off hunting on your own,” he said, as close to an admission of defeat as he was willing to give.

“Promise that you will obey if danger arises and I give you a command.” A salve to his pride.

The capitulation cost him. It wasn’t visible in his face or his voice or in the lines of his rigidly held body, but Sajia knew it regardless.

She moved from her precarious position at the balcony edge before a gust of wind could take her over. Closed the distance between them, willing to lessen the torment her victory caused him. Needing to with a depth that hinted at what they’d once been to each other, husband and wife.

It seemed natural to step into his arms, to spear her fingers into black hair as she lifted her face for his kiss. She welcomed the press of his body to hers and thrilled at the feel of his thick erection, the security of steel-muscled arms and feather-soft wings as he wrapped her in a sensual embrace.

“Promise,” he said, a command ringing in her ears and mind.

“I do.”

He claimed victory in defeat, his lips taking hers aggressively, his tongue thrusting into her mouth, giving no quarter as he overwhelmed her with sensation. Mine, his kiss claimed, and in that instant she couldn’t fight it, couldn’t deny it.

Heat poured into her, the clash of wills forgotten as lust coursed through her veins like lava running down a mountainside, scorching and consuming everything in its path.

Need didn’t accurately define what she felt. Even lust was too tame a word.

A moan escaped and the sound fed his hunger. Arms and wings tightened around her. Carnal images flooded her mind, scenes of them together, his memories or her own pulled from the depths of her subconscious, she couldn’t be sure, only that they made her shiver and crave the feel of naked skin to naked skin, hunger to have his body joined to hers.

She whimpered when his lips left hers, a protest against the loss of them. His eyes glittered, his features once again arrogant and commanding. “Do you still wish to leave our home, Sajia?”

“Yes,” she said, despite the desperate ache of desire.

“Then we will go to the red zone. But rather than looking for the man who made the charm and trying to bargain with him for his client’s name, there’s a better way to locate the scion.”

“How?”

She wouldn’t have thought Addai could appear more dangerous than she’d already seen him, more hardened and ruthless and forbidding, but whatever he had in mind made it so.

After a long pause, he said, “I know of a Finder, but getting access to her will require dealing with the vice lord Rimmon. He’s not quite my enemy, though neither is he an ally.”

Addai’s hand once again cupped her cheek, his thumb rubbing over lips swollen from their kiss. “We’ll go to him, but only if you let me handle the negotiations, Sajia.”

His voice held no possibility of compromise. She acquiesced with a nod. “Where will he be?”

“His club.” Addai’s sharp smile returned. “He calls it Temptation.”

**FOUR**

Temptation. The club stood with the other Victorians on a street lined with them. Sajia knew of them, of course. But even if she hadn’t, their nature and the kinds of people drawn to them were revealed in names like Sinners and Greed and Envy.

Bouncers guarded their entrances. Some of the clubs were member-only, reserved for the elite and wealthy, while others served a broader public. The vices they catered to varied, but all of them closed at dark, locking their patrons in for the night.

Vampires hunted these streets after the sun set. As did Weres and feral dogs, ghouls and any number of supernatural beings.

Her attention returned to the immaculately restored home in front of her. Even in the days before The Last War, this would have belonged to someone wealthy, someone with the money and inclination to preserve a historical building designed by a famous architect.

Unlike the thick-necked men in leather or jeans who guarded the entrances of the other clubs, the men on either side of the doorway here wore expensive suits. They looked like elegant gentlemen, though Sajia didn’t doubt for a moment that they were armed and very, very deadly.

“Will we be able to get in to see Rimmon?” she asked.

Addai laughed, his hand moving from its possessive grip on her upper arm to settle at the center of her back like a heated brand. “Of course.”

He urged her forward with a stroke to her spine. “Don’t forget your promise, beloved. Allow me to handle things here, and regardless of any perceived danger, keep your knives sheathed. A threat of harm to you and it would be nothing for me to slaughter everyone in the club if that’s what it took to assure myself you were safe.”

Heat flowed through her, mixed equally with icy fear. She glanced at his face with its stunning beauty, savored the endearment and the depth of his feelings even as spikes of primal terror skittered through her at having such a ruthless, powerful being lay claim to her.

The bouncers remained on either side of the doors until she and Addai were nearly at the entrance. Then they each took a step, as though they would block them from entering rather than admit them.

“We will pass unchallenged,” Addai said in a tone that slid through Sajia’s mind like a faint echo.

The men turned simultaneously. In a synchronized movement, they opened the doors, saying nothing as Addai and Sajia stepped into the club.

Hashish and burning opium scented the air. A beautiful woman in an elegant gown and wearing gloves that reached her elbows left her place on a spiraling staircase. “Take us to Rimmon,” Addai told her, and like the bouncers outside the club, she obeyed without protest.

Sajia shivered, glad she was immune to his command. Glad he wasn’t able to enthrall her with his voice.

The woman’s dress left her back bare. A slit in the skirt revealed glimpses of her labia with each step she took.

Temptation, Sajia thought, unable to keep from glancing at Addai to see if his attention was riveted to the part of the woman’s skirt and the flash of her nether lips.

His eyes met hers, and he laughed before visually caressing her, scorching her as his gaze traveled the length of her body. I have not waited thousands of years for your return to settle for transitory pleasure now, he said, the words as clear in her mind as if he’d spoken them out loud.

“How are you able to do that?”

“We are all born with gifts.” And you are my wife.

Denial sprang to her lips. He prevented it from taking form in the spoken word by halting and covering her mouth with his, his tongue thrusting, his hunger stealing her breath, stealing her will, her very soul.

Carnal images slid into her mind, serving as temptation and enticement. Not memories of a past she couldn’t remember, but of the future he intended, where the distinction between the worshipped and the one who did so was blurred and indistinct.

Her breasts swelled and nipples tightened. Arousal flowed from her slit, wetting her inner thighs as her cunt clenched and unclenched.

The sound of clapping brought her back to reality with a jolt. She wanted to blame her loss of awareness on the decadent environment, the insidious lure of air scented with opium and sex. But she wasn’t an accomplished liar, and she’d never practiced it on herself.

Addai released Sajia, reluctantly, regretting the impulse to silence her with passion. It would prove to be a mistake on his part, of that he was positive as he turned toward one of the Fallen, acknowledging the man’s presence with the use of his name, “Rimmon.”

“Lord Rimmon.”

Addai laughed. With a sweeping gesture of his arm to encompass the humans lingering in the hallway and visible through the doorways of the rooms lining it, he said, “Perhaps to those who come here to worship in your temple.”

“Are you not one of them, Addai?” The single emerald green eye in the Fallen’s burn-scarred face settled on Sajia, though nothing of his gaze revealed whether or not he could see the angelic script written on her skin. “She is quite lovely. Do you intend to join me in my sin, or did you bring her as a gift and then think to make me hunger to take possession of her?”

Rimmon’s smile became sly. “I am not averse to sharing her with you if you don’t want to give up your prize completely. It would be like the days of old, though if my memory serves, you preferred to wield a sword of a different kind than I, and the screams arising from your presence stemmed from terror instead of ecstasy.”

Addai fought against issuing a threat he couldn’t deliver on. There were repercussions for killing his kind, even one of the Fallen. “Did your burning plunge from grace lead to this?” he asked, taking the offensive, once again indicating the mass of humans with a sweep of his arm. “Do you now conduct all your business with an audience present? If so, I’m happy to accommodate you. Saril is the reason I’m here.”

All amusement left Rimmon. In a blink the look in his eye was as cold as his origins, the light glinting off it providing a glimpse of the power he’d once commanded. “Come,” he said, turning his back and walking away.

He led them past rooms where men and women engaged in sexual acts while others watched, past those with rail-thin humans who favored the touch of an opium pipe against their lips to flesh or food, and still more where the occupants crowded around gaming tables.

They passed through an area serving drink and vicarious violence via television before entering a private room, a parlor decorated in furniture to match the age of the Victorian, though Addai doubted the view through the glassed wall would have been common in any house save a brothel.

“Your private dungeon?” he asked.

“Ecstasy achieved through the redemptive power of punishment—surely you can understand how such a thing might appeal to me.”

Addai guided Sajia to a couch upholstered in French silk moiré, urging her to sit and taking up a position next to her. He draped his arm along the couch back in a casual gesture, though he felt far from calm at having Sajia with him in this place and this company.

Rimmon claimed the chair across from her, pulling it closer and making Addai ball his hand into a fist against the urge to call his sword to him. With privacy restored, Rimmon probably intended to taunt with a slow visual study of Sajia, but his eye settled on her arm and the vampire scarring there, then lifted to meet Addai’s. “You keep interesting company.”

Addai didn’t rise to the bait. Instead he said, “What’s your price for access to Saril? I have need of a Finder.”

The emerald green eye narrowed, pulling on the scar tissue around it before the sly smile returned. “Seeing you makes me think of another of my recent visitors. Tir, he called himself. There’s a certain similarity in look.”

Rimmon’s eye flicked to Sajia. “And situation. A brother of yours, perhaps? Though it could be argued we are all brothers even if some of us have so much further to fall and become forgotten. When last I saw him, he wore a collar of enslavement. I wonder if you believe his punishment fits his crime.”

“He is free of it now.”

“Ah. That explains how you know of Saril. He healed her in exchange for something I could provide. And now you want something from her. Divine intervention, I wonder? Or the vagaries of fate?”

Rimmon lifted a hand to his scarred face. “Had my daughter’s life not hung in the balance between life and death, I might have asked Tir to restore me to my former glory. But from you . . . I have never heard it said that you offer anything but death.”

His good eye returned to Sajia, this time undressing her, clearly imagining her in his bed.

Addai wasn’t able to stop himself. He opened clenched fingers and his sword was there, hungry for the blood of the Fallen. “Death is still mine to offer.”

Rimmon’s smile was victorious, as if goading Addai into acting had been part of his price. “So she is aware of your nature. Good. Then let us discuss terms.”

He paused, a silent command for Addai to put away his weapon before they continued. Addai complied, jaw clenched.

“One search,” Rimmon said. “Assuming of course that Saril agrees to perform it for you. Done in my presence. And in return, I will give you a choice of payments.”

He gestured to the room on the other side of the glass. “If death is still yours to deliver, then show me one given with pleasure and survived in ecstasy. Strip your companion and bind her to any piece of equipment, then attend her until her screams cease and she falls silent in la petite morte.”

Addai’s cock throbbed at the images Rimmon’s words created. Desire burned through him, and he fought against revealing just how much he longed to join his body to hers. What Rimmon described was tame compared to the fantasies he harbored, the things he wanted to do with Sajia.

Next to him she sat ramrod straight, bristling with resistance and rebellion, seething in her silence but managing to keep her promise to allow him to negotiate with the vice lord. Had Rimmon’s terms allowed for privacy . . .

She was safe from this particular bargain. He would never allow another to look at her naked form or witness her in pleasure and live to dream about it.

“And the second choice?”

“If you don’t prefer pleasure, then there is only one other. Pain. The terms for access to Saril are the same, only it will be you who is bound, and your companion who selects which of my toys will be applied to your back.”

Sajia jerked in denial, a small sound of distress escaping. Addai’s hand moved from the back of the couch to her arm, his fingers lightly tracing the vampire marks, reminding her of what there was to lose if something happened to the scion, or if he decided to end their truce and risk her hatred by taking her back to the chalet and holding her there.

“How many strikes?” Addai asked. Compared to the agony of Sajia’s death so long ago, physical pain was easily endured.

“As many as it takes for your back to resemble the bloody mess of mine when flesh and wings were burned away.” Rimmon leaned forward abruptly, the cold eye alight with fire. “You are no less guilty than I was judged to be, and I would argue that your transgressions are greater.”

“True enough,” Addai said, following it by restating the terms, modifying them. “And for this, there will be one search, done before sunset on this day, in your presence and accompanied by your vow not to use what you learn in any way, or reveal it to another.”

“Agreed.”

Addai stood, and with a thought his shirt disappeared. “Let us begin then.”

No! Sajia silently screamed as Addai tugged her to her feet. But she couldn’t force herself to give voice to it, not with the lives of her family, and possibly Corinne’s, at stake.

Rimmon touched a place on the wall, and it slid open to reveal a doorway into the dungeon. He didn’t bother to close it after they entered.

She hadn’t been able to see it from her seat in his parlor, but one wall was done fully in mirrors, and anchored to it was a saltire. Though she had never been bound spread-eagle for punishment, carnal or otherwise, she was well familiar with its use. No vampire estate housing servants or progeny was without one. In private or in public, in play or in deadly seriousness, vampires enjoyed torment and drawing blood.

“Perhaps you’d like me to assist you in choosing the best tool for the task,” Rimmon said as he led them to a wall where whips and floggers and paddles hung from hooks, while canes and switches lay in narrow, ornate cradles.

Sajia shuddered at the thought of applying any of them to Addai. Of willfully cutting his skin and making him bleed.

Her reaction didn’t go unnoticed. Rimmon laughed and said, “It’s not too late to choose pleasure over pain.”

Addai reached out, plucking a cat-o’-nines from the wall. Sajia’s heart cried out at the sight of the thin strips of leather, the tails braided to form sharp edges.

“Use this one,” he said. “It will make our stay here shorter.”

Rimmon laughed again. “But far more painful. I’m not sure whether to feel pleased or cheated by your choice. But if you’ve made it, then we’ll adjourn to the crux decussata.”

He preceded them to the St. Andrew’s Cross. The single eye shone like a multifaceted gem as he turned it on Sajia. “You’ll have to do the honors of binding him.”

Sajia’s heart pounded in her chest, horror building there as Addai faced the mirrored wall. At the chalet, she’d claimed the past had no relevance, but as he lifted his arms and allowed her to place a manacle around his wrist, the first tender shoots of love took root in her soul. It humbled her that he would subject himself to such torment all because they’d once lived as man and wife.

She secured the buckles with trembling fingers. He turned his head and their eyes met, his holding a depth of commitment almost beyond her imagining.

Emotions flooded her, joy and tenderness and hope—all overlaid by a rising despair at what this bargain demanded. She knelt at his feet and a glimmer of the future they might have together once Corinne was found worked its way into her thoughts. Yet even as images of home and children came, part of her feared that one day he would decide he loved a memory, not her.

“The rest of it or our agreement is null,” Rimmon said.

Addai’s pants slid into nonexistence, and she bound his ankles. Regardless of the pose and the restraints, there was no diminishment of his innate arrogance and pride.

Looking up the line of his body, Sajia swallowed tears at the thought of marring perfection, of using the flogger to cut his skin and make him bleed when in that moment, all she wanted was to give him pleasure, to press kisses to his flesh and stroke him with her hands.

She forced herself to pick up the cat-o’-nines he’d dropped to the floor before placing his arms against the smooth wood and steel of the saltire. Rimmon moved a short distance away, taking a seat on what looked like a throne.

Sajia stepped back. She couldn’t suppress the tears then, or the whimper, as she raised her arm and delivered the first strike.

Pain streaked through Addai. Wrapped in flesh, he felt it as a human might, though unlike a human, all he had to do was give up any pretense of mortality to be free of it.

A second blow followed the first, and then a third. He didn’t bother to count beyond that. It would take more than what a human could survive for Rimmon’s price to be met.

He watched Sajia in the mirror. His heart both wept and rejoiced at the sight of her tears.

Again and again she raised her arm and brought the cat-o’nines down in punishing strikes. Flaying his skin so the muscles in his arms stood out in rigid relief as he fought to remain constrained by flesh.

The present dominated until blood flowed down his back. Then he gave himself over to memories.

Physical agony took the place of emotions he’d carried for thousands of years. Guilt and regret. Rage and hate.

There was catharsis in the pain and the bleeding. He embraced it, letting it wash the past away.

Endorphins rose. Where once fury had filled the abyss created by emotional agony, now desire filled the one carved out by physical pain.

Addai felt Sajia’s anguish, and even more sublime, the strengthening of the bond between them as her tears continued to flow and her arm shook with fatigue and reluctance.

Her whimpers of protest were a serenade to his heart. He hardened and remained that way, each additional lash becoming another thread weaving their souls together.

Finally she threw the cat-o’-nines to the floor in a signal that payment had been made. Rimmon rose from his throne and touched one of the lions carved into the wood. Curtains closed over the glass separating dungeon from office. “It seems you made the better bargain. I’ll be back in a little while to take you to Saril.”

Sajia went to Addai on a shuddering sob, freeing him of the manacles around his wrists before Rimmon left the room. She knelt, undoing those around his ankles with fingers that trembled and a soul that ached.

He turned and her eyes traveled upward, soaking in the beauty of him, the unmarred skin. Felt the shock of remorse pushed aside by the sight of testicles hanging beneath a potent display of hardened masculinity.

She licked her lips in unconscious reaction, only aware of having done it when his penis bobbed, pulling away from his abdomen as if it would come to her mouth. She lifted her eyes to meet his and pushed words through a throat clogged with emotions that shouldn’t be able to coexist. “Can you heal yourself?”

“Of course,” he said, arrogance in his voice and something she wouldn’t have thought possible except for the evidence of it only inches away from her face. Hunger. Dark and dangerous. Commanding and all-encompassing.

**FIVE**

The air shimmered, and Sajia felt the caress of it against her face like a faint icy breeze. In the mirror his back became whole, unblemished, as if the terrible damage, the pain she’d inflicted because of her oath, her family, had never been.

It wasn’t compulsion as the vampires were capable of, but it was equally compelling. She could no more resist the pull of desire, the need to deliver pleasure after having delivered so much pain, than a blood-slave could a master’s command.

Her hands settled on Addai’s thighs. His muscles flexed beneath her palms, vibrated with tension though his lips remained sealed, his face austere, challenging her to coax an expression from him, a cry where he’d remained mute under the lashes of the cat-o’-nines.

She laughed softly, something she would have thought impossible moments earlier. He wouldn’t be able to hold against the torment of her tongue, the teasing prelude to taking him in her mouth, sucking until he was once again at her mercy. In this his immense power didn’t matter, he was still male.

Sajia leaned forward as her hands slid upward on his thighs. In the mirror there was the subtle flexing of his buttocks as he braced himself for the instant she would touch his cock.

She’d wielded the flogger without stopping, wanting to get it over with quickly, to hurry through it rather than commit each strike to memory. And now she found herself at risk of going quickly once again, but for far different reasons.

Her hands settled on either side of his thick erection, and she had to force them to remain there, just as she had to force herself not to press kisses along his hardened length. Where she’d hastened through the pain, she wanted to linger in pleasure.

She rubbed her cheek against his cock, soft skin against soft skin. It jerked at the contact, and he wrapped her braid around a hand, using it in a silent command to turn her face.

She complied, lips touching heated flesh, tongue darting out for a first taste. Savoring it.

A shudder went through Addai, a wave of such pleasure he only barely managed to remain standing. He’d been without a woman since her death.

The angels sent to this world weren’t inherently carnal or emotional. It’s what had made them good at watching impassively, patrolling, killing. But the longer they were here, the more they had free will, the more the temptations of the flesh assailed them.

Some of them succumbed. He had succumbed.

In that first moment he’d laid eyes on Sajia drawing water from the well, desire had consumed him and then love had followed it. To settle for another when he knew one day she’d be returned to him would have been a betrayal.

His hand tightened on her braid. When they were truly alone, he’d unbind her hair so the silky strands of it fanned out over her back and buttocks. He’d spear his fingers through it, an intimate act among the Djinn, one allowed only with those well loved and well trusted.

Now, Sajia, he commanded, accompanying the order with an image of her encircling his cock with her hand and guiding its head to her mouth.

Her sultry laugh had his buttocks clenching, his eyes closing briefly as he shored up his defenses, ordered himself not to beg, not to show any weakness.

There will be retribution, he warned.

I look forward to it.

She measured his length with a string of kisses, with a hot trail left by her tongue.

Fire engulfed him. Lust that caused him to thrust.

The only weapon he could use against her was his mind, his imagination and his memory of what they’d once done together. He wielded both ruthlessly, showing her the punishment she was earning by teasing him. A punishment he would deliver when they got home, when she was totally at his mercy.

Sajia grew wet at seeing herself draped naked over his thighs, her legs parted just enough to reveal her swollen folds and glistening slit. She’d never played sexual games, never had any interest in them despite their prevalence in the vampires’ world.

She would never have imagined she’d allow a man to bend her over his thighs and deliver a spanking. But with Addai she discovered she wanted it, craved it, as if the images he projected into her mind found a deep longing to submit and coaxed it out of hiding.

On a murmur of pleasure she gave him what he demanded from her. Her hands left his thighs, one cupping the smooth, heavy sac between his legs, fondling and weighing and caressing, the other forming a fist around a cock that felt like satin over steel, like heated marble though so much more malleable than cool stone.

She guided him to her mouth, explored his penis with her tongue before taking his cock head between her lips and holding it there, his scent and taste making her think of icy peaks and desolate places, of harsh winter winds.

A small measure of victory came with the moan he couldn’t suppress, the closing of his eyes as he gave himself over to sensation. Thick, sooty black lashes should have made him look feminine, but his beauty had no gender; it was otherworldly, terrifying power given form.

And somehow he’d come to be hers. Somehow he’d moved heaven and earth so she was reborn and returned to him.

There was a fluttering in her chest, her heart destabilized by the enormity of what he’d done—not just in the past, but here, in the present, allowing himself to be bound, hurt, to become entertainment. Looking up the line of his body, seeing the pleasure in his face, she wanted to believe that she would always satisfy him.

She had a moment to wonder if Rimmon watched, if the curtains closing over glass gave only the illusion of privacy. Then banished the thought as she drew Addai deeper into her mouth, working him with her lips and tongue. Restraining him with the tight close of her fingers around his cock so he couldn’t thrust any deeper. Keeping ecstasy out of reach, denied until he was panting, quivering, his hands no longer still but roaming, caressing, his words no longer contained, but her name turned into a litany.

He didn’t beg. They’d have to be truly alone for that to happen. But she grew wetter at seeing a measure of the power she had over him, at knowing one day she might hear him plead to be allowed to come.

Her channel clenched and unclenched, the desperate need to feel him inside her intensifying as his lust grew and his breathing became ragged. She sucked, taking him deeper, swallowing on him repeatedly, no longer caring about staving off his orgasm.

Addai nearly came as her throat closed around him. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to abandon the last measure of control and allow himself release in a primitive, earthy claiming.

He might have if he hadn’t sensed Rimmon’s imminent return, if he hadn’t so desperately wanted his first release to be in the tight, hot depths of her channel. Searing ecstasy joined to an image burned into Sajia’s consciousness, not fantasy or memory, but shared reality.

It took incredible strength of will to pull from her heated mouth, to part from her long enough to remove her clothing.

As he knelt in front of her, his hands closed briefly around her ankles, where angelic script circled as it did her wrists.

Rising, he caressed that written above her heart, pressing his lips to her flesh as satisfaction of a different kind arrived along with the heightened need to get her back to the chalet quickly. With a word, he could release her from the bindings holding her in a human form, but there were also places where the containment spell had faded into nothing.

He pushed worry over it away. Resolve and the desperate need to claim her left no room for it.

He took her mouth, sharing breath and heat, his arm around her waist, holding her bare mound against his throbbing cock, thrusting and rubbing his rigid length against her stiffened, swollen clit as his tongue battled hers.

Her whimpers were a roar of pleasure through his mind. Her hands caressing him as her skin burned against his, a sweet torment he’d pay any price to endure.

I need you, she said into his mind, an intimate contact that had his testicles tightening in warning and enabled him to pull from her embrace, to turn her so she faced the mirrored wall, her palms pressed to it for support.

Then have me, wife, he said, white wings manifested behind him, spreading out in proud display, trapping the mirrored image of them together as with one thrust, he entered her.

Sajia cried out, nearly consumed by the intense pleasure of having his cock filling her, by the eroticism of his possession. She couldn’t close her eyes to the sight of him, of them together.

The hard lines of his face showed arrogant control, but the throbbing of his penis, the sheen of sweat on his heated skin told a different story. She moved against him and his features tightened, awarding her a small victory. One she paid for as his hand cupped her breast while the other stroked her belly before settling on her clit.

Her channel clenched on his length, hungry for movement, for the feel of him thrusting. For a release that would come with the hot spill of seed deep inside her.

“Please, Addai,” she whispered, hearing the sound of submission in her own voice.

His eyes flared hot in the mirror, and then he began moving in and out of her, the fingers on her breast and clit squeezing, twisting, delivering pain to blend with pleasure until finally there was only the sweet oblivion of orgasm and the soul-deep satisfaction that came from feeling him shuddering in release, of seeing his wings outstretched, trembling as ecstasy took him.

Addai nearly surrendered to the need to wrap Sajia in arms and wings and take her home. Emotion, intense and unquantifiable, surged through him with the pounding of his heart. Nothing could be allowed to happen to her.

His hands took possession of her breasts, weighing them as she’d done his testicles. Her arched back and soft cry were his reward, the fisting of her channel on his cock his sensual punishment.

Temptation and torment. If he thought she would forgive him for making her abandon the search—

“Dress,” he told her, forcing himself to pull from her heated depths and step backward. His wings shielded her from view as the sound of a curtain opening announced Rimmon’s return.

Retracing their steps through the club, Addai couldn’t miss the presence of so many of the Fallen. They glided through the rooms like sleek sharks among hapless prey, the humans drawn to them, mesmerized in spite of what they’d become.

Where the phantom presence of wings would once have brushed against his senses, now there was nothing. And where so many of his kind in the same place usually created a symphony of sound, the sweet notes of power in a choir heard only by angels, now he heard only jangling discord, a grating pressure that scraped over his skin and had him grinding his teeth and fighting not to call his sword.

The Fallen gave him wide berth, though they didn’t bother hiding their curiosity, or the sly hungry smiles that had as much to do with anticipating his ultimate downfall as desiring the woman he so clearly considered his.

There was no help for it. He could no more force his hand away from Sajia than he could let her out of sight now that she’d been returned to him.

He knew why the Fallen were here. Knew too what they couldn’t. They were part of a larger plan involving Saril, Rimmon’s sole living descendant. In the end those not considered Djinn allies would be named enemies.

Rimmon led them to the elegant staircase near the front doors, pausing after taking only a few upward steps. He murmured to one of the women who waited there, ready to descend and serve as hostess to those entering the club and desiring it.

Her face flushed with pleasure, and she left her position to climb the stairs. Envious looks from the other woman followed her, the skirt she wore parting with each step, her folds glistening, revealing her excitement at having been chosen.

At the top of the staircase she left them, moving down a hallway carpeted by handwoven rugs from what the humans had once called the Holy Land. Priceless artwork hung on the walls. And unlike the lower stories of the Victorian, this floor had the hushed feel of a private, inviolate sanctuary.

Rimmon stopped in front of a closed door. A peremptory knock announced his arrival, though he didn’t wait to be invited inside. He entered the room.

Addai let Sajia precede him, then closed the door behind them as a precaution. Saril looked up from the book she was reading, eyes the same green as her father’s, but wary and soft rather than anticipatory and hardened.

“I have a task for you,” Rimmon said without preamble. He crossed to a table where an arrangement of wildflowers sat clustered in a squat vase.

Panic flared in Saril’s face when he unceremoniously plucked the purple and yellow blossoms out of the water, tossing them carelessly on a table that had survived The Last War—when the furniture and books marking man’s passing from ignorant ape to more refined creation became fuel for fires in caves built of crushed buildings and twisted steel.

He turned, the vase seeming more delicate in his hands. His lips curved upward in a twisted parody of mirth. “Did you think I was ignorant of your gift, Saril? It was once mine, as was this scrying bowl you so cleverly hide in plain sight by using it for your flowers.”

He closed the distance to his daughter and put the bowl down on a reading stand next to her. Addai urged Sajia forward, halting her several feet away from the Finder when he spotted the weapon lying on the floor next to Saril’s chair, no doubt left there in case one of the Fallen below grew foolishly impatient and tried to claim her.

The sword might be blackened, given permanent physical form and cast into this world in the same lightning strike of retribution that melted Rimmon’s flesh and stripped him of wings, but angelic script remained etched into blade and hilt, words of power that coupled with will were capable of killing his kind, Fallen or not.

The inside rim of the bowl was also marked by angelic writing. And whether Saril guessed at the full truth or not, Rimmon’s words held it.

Once sight, the gift to Find, had been his. But like so many of the grigori, the early angelic watchers, he became tempted by the mortal, led by carnal desire to share knowledge beyond what the humans were supposed to be given, and fell as a result of it.Like pearls scattered among swine, Addai had thought on learning of it so many thousands of years ago. The bowl and others like it troughs for the creatures of mud to drink from.

But that was before Sajia. Before he himself gave in to the temptations of the flesh and lay down with one of the mortal—worse—with an enemy. For that crime and all the others following as a result of it, being judged Fallen would seem a merciful punishment should his transgressions become known and those allied with the Djinn fail to take possession of this world.

Rimmon took his daughter’s chin in his hand. “I won’t pretend that you’ll use your gift because I ask it of you. What boon do you want? And don’t bother saying your freedom. Too many know of your existence now.”

“Because you’ve made me a prize,” Saril said, anger vibrating in the words. “A prisoner you intend to hand over to another jailor.”

“I do what is best for the both of us. You have always been a prize, Saril, one at risk of being discovered and taken at any time. If you view the luxury and safety I’ve surrounded you with as a prison, then so be it. Name your price.”

Her lips firmed and her chin jutted forward in silent refusal. Addai silently cursed at finding his own happiness tied to this girl on the brink of discovering the fate arranged for her by the Djinn and their allies.

One search. Assuming of course that Saril agrees to perform it for you.

As the flaw woven into the negotiations with Rimmon showed itself, Sajia pulled from Addai’s grasp, refusing to let his suffering be for nothing.

She went to Saril and crouched next to her chair, prepared to beg. “Please put aside your differences with your father long enough to hear what brought us here. We wouldn’t have come if the need wasn’t urgent. Corinne—my charge—is missing and because of it, everyone I love is at risk.”

Saril’s gaze went to the freshly healed scarring on Sajia’s upper arm. “You serve vampires?”

“Yes. I was orphaned in the San Joaquin soon after I was born. My aunt and uncle brought me to San Francisco and raised me with the same love they gave their own children. I took an oath to serve the Tucci because I liked Corinne, and in becoming her companion I would also be able to give back to my family.”

“How old is Corinne?”

Sajia felt some of the tension inside her dissolve as hope returned with the question. “Sixteen and still entirely human. She’s not what you’d expect of a vampire scion. Corinne is shy, some would say mousy, though I think her forgettable appearance stems from lack of confidence and the knowledge that among the Tucci, female offspring aren’t valued until they survive the transition.”

Saril’s features softened further, and Addai spoke up, saying, “If it has any weight with you, Tir is my brother.”

The last of Saril’s earlier resistance melted at the mention of Tir. “I was dying and he healed me.”

“Yes. That’s his gift.”

“Did he find what he was looking for?”

“He found it. And more. He’s happily bound to a woman who loves him.”

A small sigh of pleasure escaped Saril at hearing of a romantic ending. “I’ll help you.”

Her expression firmed again as she looked at her father. “I want a day to explore the outer harbor, and your promise that any treasure I discover while doing it is mine to keep.”

The single emerald eye narrowed as he contemplated what she might be looking for, or what she might find. But apparently he decided that whatever it was, he could successfully deal with it. “Granted.”

She took the bowl off the table and placed it on her lap, then reached out, halting when her fingertips were inches away from the marks on Sajia’s arm. “May I? It might help me find Corinne.”

Sajia nodded and Saril quickly traced the scars. When she was done, she placed both hands on the bowl and stared into the water.

One moment dragged into a second, and then a third. Sajia caught herself holding her breath and exhaled, the sound of it loud in the hushed quiet of the room. She wanted to stand, to look into the bowl, aware with the light coming in through the window of how late in the day it was.

Her palms grew damp waiting. Her heart beat erratically.

Finally Saril blinked and looked up, her expression deeply troubled. “She’s being held prisoner on a fishing boat. The boat is moving. It doesn’t seem too far away, but I can’t tell if it’s still in the bay or if it’s reached open waters. There’s no name on its side and nothing distinctive about it except that there’s an old red lantern hanging on the right side of the cabin doorway and a blue on the left.”

Fear settled around Sajia, squeezing like a merciless fist. The Tucci didn’t own fishing fleets or container ships. If the bay and open ocean were to be searched for Corinne, The Master would have to negotiate with other families, and that would mean a delay and a loss of face.

Given how little he valued female scions, there was every possibility he’d decide to leave Corinne to whatever fate befell her, while placing the public blame for the failed betrothal on Sajia, claiming she’d betrayed her oath and ordering her killed to satisfy honor and the Gairden family.

Addai would never allow it. At the first hint of threat he’d take her away or he’d wage war on the Tucci, either of which would lead to the very thing that terrified her, the death of her family because of her. She glanced at him in panic, but some of it eased when he told Rimmon, “Sajia and I will take Araña’s boat in order to look for the scion.”

“As you wish. But the moment the Constellation leaves the outer harbor, the agreement I made with Tir for its protection ends. Bring it back into the waters I control and it’ll find a resting place among the other sunken ships.”

**SIX**

Though Sajia’s trips to Oakland had been limited, like anyone serving a scion she’d been given lessons in geography and human politics. She knew the general direction of the outer harbor controlled by Rimmon, though not how long it would take to reach it.“We’ll have to hurry if we hope to get the boat into the bay by nightfall,” she said as they left Temptation, matching actions to words—only to be halted within steps by a manacle of fingers.

“We’ll continue our search for the scion tomorrow,” Addai said, swinging her around to face him. “Tonight we return home.”

The familiar arrogance was back. Deadly purpose returned to eyes as black as any abyss.

“No and no again,” she said, her hand going to the knife at her waist, thoughts flashing first to their battle at the chalet and the blood she’d drawn there, then to his back coated with it as she’d wielded the cat-o’-nines.

The fight left her, though her determination didn’t. She abandoned the blade in favor of stepping into him, close enough to share breath and heat.

She touched her hand to his chest and felt his heart beat against her palm. Steady strokes that made her think of home and safety, of a love so deep it defied even death. Of passion found in firm touches and feathery caresses, of desire all-consuming and eternal. Addai.

“Please,” she said, knowing she couldn’t allow herself to waver in her resolve. “This is important to me. Surely the boat has a cabin. We can take shelter there. It should be safe enough in open water, and if danger comes, I’ll go willingly. A blink and we can be in your home, your bed.”

“Our home. Our bed,” Addai said, resolve melting with her entreaty and the soft pleading in her eyes as she looked up at him.

He was glad none of the brothers allied with the Djinn were here to witness his defeat. He conceded it only because he could tell himself that traveling to and from the chalet with Sajia posed a greater danger than taking possession of the Constellation for the night. With the sigils on her skin weakening, her Djinn nature might reveal itself as they traveled. His own passing through the metaphysical plane created little more than a ripple, but a Djinn breaching it left a trail of sound that would summon angelic enemies if they were near.

They would arrive with the intention of killing her. They would die in the attempt. But there was risk even in that, and victory over them wouldn’t come without a cost.

He couldn’t capitulate without giving her fair warning. He leaned in, lips touching hers, the image of her bound to the bed arriving in his thoughts as he issued his threat. Don’t think to control me with your body, Sajia. Soon enough you’ll discover that I am the master of it.

She shivered. Not fear, her scent and the hardening of her nipples spoke only of arousal. He smiled as he contemplated turning defeat into a chance to give her the first of her lessons in submission. No boat left the dock without a multitude of ropes onboard it.

“Let’s go,” he said, denying them both the kiss they craved, the exploration of wet heat and the thrust of tongue against tongue, the sharing of breath that bound their spirits together more tightly each time it happened. Her whimper at the loss of his lips against hers was a soothing balm laid over the turbulent, intense emotions her presence created in him.

The farther they got from the Victorian-lined street with its clubs serving human vice, the more deserted the red zone became. Shops gave way to clusters of homes where the poor lived, and then, as the air took on the smell of the ocean, to twisted steel and rusted ruin, what remained of cranes and shipping containers from the days of the humans’ Last War.

Beyond the jungle of ruin, the exposed hulls and sunken debris of ships turned the harbor into a treacherous, watery graveyard. As they boarded the Constellation, Addai said, “Throw off the ropes. I’ll start the engines.”

He was unconcerned about navigating the dangerous outer harbor. Tir’s memories were his. His brother had been the one to recover the Constellation for Araña and guide it through the minefield of wrecked ships.

To ease Sajia’s mind, they searched for the fishing boat Saril had described until darkness crowded into dusk. Then Addai insisted they stop, and, as the anchor dropped, a hot swirl of desert-scented wind blew across the deck, announcing the arrival of a Djinn.

Irial’s eyes lingered appreciatively over Sajia’s form, settling briefly on the scorpion pendant at her throat before meeting Addai’s. “So this is the reward my father spoke of. Now I understand why I was sent with food . . . and bedding. Perhaps I’ll remain and aid you in the latter.”

Addai took a threatening step forward before he could stop himself. With a laugh, Irial set down the basket he carried, then disappeared as suddenly as he’d arrived, choosing to take no form rather than become the raven of his House.

“Your brother?”

“ No.”

“He called me your reward.” There was no anger in her voice, just the hesitant question, Your reward for doing what?

For traveling down the path your death set me on, Addai said, choosing to answer intimately, in a reminder of what they were to each other. There is nothing I’ve done that I wouldn’t do a thousand times again if that’s what it took to get you back, or if doing it would rewrite the past so you were never lost to me in the first place.

Sajia’s heart turned over in her chest at his pronouncement. “I’m not the same person,” she forced herself to say, silently confronting the fear she harbored, that one day he’d realize he loved the memory of who she had been in the past more than who she was in this life.

He crossed the distance, arms enclosing her. His expression harsh as his lips descended, claiming hers in a taking that left no room for resistance.

In all the ways that matter, you are the same, he said, his hardened cock an exclamation mark against her mound and belly. Never doubt it, Sajia.

As the last of the light faded, she pulled from his arms and picked up the basket left by their visitor. “I’ll set out the food and make the bed.”

She couldn’t bring herself to ask him to keep searching for Corinne during the night, not when the risk existed that he could be pulled from the sky by a bioengineered sea creature or a supernatural one, hindered and drowned because of his wings. It didn’t stop worry from gnawing at her, but deep down she accepted they’d done what they could for Corinne today, and she had to believe tomorrow they’d find and free her.

They ate at the small table in the cabin. Had Addai not been driven by thoughts of binding Sajia to the bed, he would have fed her by hand on the mattress. He would have dribbled honey over her naked breasts and watched as it slid over her curves, then along her flat stomach, filling the well of her navel before coating her sweet mound in an irresistible invitation for his tongue to follow.

His cock was hard again, a near-constant state since he’d first learned Sajia would soon be returned to him. Her flushed cheeks and heated glances told him she was equally aroused, their time together at Temptation wetting a carnal appetite for pleasure rather than appeasing the hunger of it.

He finished eating before she did and leaned back, drinking in the sight of her, his heart aching as he visually caressed the face that had haunted him for thousands of years. With a thought, he rid himself of clothing, then curled his fingers around his hardened length, making no attempt to hide his actions as he moved his fisted hand up and down on his organ.

Her heightened flush and the small catch of her breath served as reward. The dart of her tongue as she licked honey from her fingers a sensual punishment.

When she didn’t reach for more of the bread or the cheese and fruit that had accompanied it, he pitched his voice in a demand no mortal would have been able to deny. “Remove your clothing, Sajia.”

A small smile played over her lips in answer. Her eyelashes lowered as she contemplated defying him, letting him know by her response that if she agreed to his demands, it would be because she chose to. “Is this how it was before between us?”

“You’ve seen my memories of it.”

“And if I don’t want to play the slave to your master?”

“Disrobe, Sajia,” he said in answer, pressing more of his will on her, taking pleasure in the fact that he couldn’t truly bend her to it. Desire intensifying at the erotic fear he caught glimpses of when her gaze strayed to the soft lengths of rope he’d casually thrown onto the bed upon entering the cabin.

Long moments passed, the sexual tension building as she made him wait, drawing out the game until he tightened his grip on his cock rather than stroke it. She knew what would come if she accepted the first of his commands.

His heart thundered in his chest. Anticipation built along with a craving that surpassed even the desires of his flesh, for her to trust him, to demonstrate it by allowing herself to be bound as he’d allowed himself to be manacled.

He only barely suppressed a moan when she rose gracefully from her seat and stepped away from the table, providing him an unhindered view. The shirt was the first garment to hit the floor, her breasts drawing his attention and holding it.

Dark, dark nipples pouted in sultry beckoning, urging him to kneel before her and take them into his mouth. To bite and suck and lick until the evidence of her arousal flowed freely down her inner thighs, until the scent of it forced him to place his lips on her smooth, heated mound, to lap and thrust with his tongue before taking her with his cock.

Seeing the hunger in him, she cupped her breasts, rubbed the hardened peaks with her thumbs until only the pain of his hand around his cock kept him from taking her to the floor like a ravenous beast and fucking her.

He forced his gaze away from her beautiful breasts. “No transgression ever goes unpunished,” he said, a warning he suspected would become a refrain in their lives together. “Take the rest of it off.”

Her hands swept downward in a sensuous glide he was only too eager to follow with his lips. She paused, once again lingering, taking her time in obeying, fingers slowly loosening the pants, then pushing them off her hips, down sleekly muscled legs.

She bent with their descent, affording him the view of a delicate length of spine, the dusky curve of her buttocks as she removed her short boots before stepping out of the pants.

He could no more stop himself from closing the distance between them than he could force himself to leave her.

The feel of her skin against his was very nearly his undoing. It’d be so easy to lift her in his arms, to join his body to hers where they stood. One thrust. Two. And he could savor a quick release before carrying her to bed for a lengthier one.

He resisted, tormented them both by wrapping his arms around her, holding her heated mound against his hot, rigid length. His wings manifested, further enfolding her as he lowered his lips to hers, plunging his tongue into the hot depths of her mouth and shuddering when she welcomed it, rubbed her own against it before sucking him deeper, reminding him of the ecstasy he’d experienced when it was his cock thrusting between her lips.

My spirit to yours. The same formal words had a variety of uses among the Djinn, and though he longed to hear her speak them, between lovers they were unnecessary. To place her soul fully into his keeping, she had only to will it so and accompany it with the sharing of breath. He had only to speak the forbidden incantation to tie himself to this world and to her.

He craved the binding of their lives and spirits with the same desperate need he felt to join their bodies together. But where the latter required only that he push his cock into her slick, heated channel, the former required him to free her of the angelic script confining her to human form. And the moment he did so the knowledge of her Djinn nature separated and held in the scorpion pendant would flow into her.

He couldn’t risk it. Not yet. Not until he was sure of her.

He shuddered, fighting the urge to place his cock head at her wet opening and enter her. It was all he could do to release Sajia rather than carry her to the mattress and immediately come down on top of her.

As if sensing his weakness, she said, Make love to me, projecting it into his mind and reinforcing it with the grinding of her mound and belly against his erection.

The deep craving for her willing submission gave him the strength to take a step backward and say, “You know what I want. Lie down and position yourself so I can tether your wrists and ankles to the bed.”

A shiver went through Sajia. Her channel clenched violently.

She was so wet, so needy that tears nearly leaked from the corners of her eyes. He overpowered her with his beauty, with the depth of his desire for her.

Never would she have imagined complying so readily, so easily. She felt his eyes on her back, on her buttocks, on the glimpses of her swollen folds as she walked away from him.

Sajia got on the bed as he’d ordered, lifting her arms above her head and spreading her legs, loving what it did to him, hardening his face as he fought to master his lust, hardening his cock in defiance of the stranglehold he had on it.

He stood over her. Breathing barely controlled. The arrogant mask smoothing into place, bringing with it a visceral fear, a forbidden thrill that had her canting her hips.

His lips curved in a dangerous smile. His eyes were molten onyx as he freed his cock in favor of picking up the short lengths of rope and using them to hold her open, helpless.

He knelt between her thighs, wings visible but no longer a physical reality. His cock leaving a wet trail across his belly, his testicles on proud display as his eyes roamed possessively, hungrily, scorching her with his visual caress.

She didn’t know what to expect, only that she craved his attention. Needed his touch as desperately as she needed air to live.

“Please,” she said, bound, willing to beg for mercy where he hadn’t been when he chose pain over pleasure rather than allow the vice lord to see her naked.

“No transgression ever goes unpunished,” Addai reminded her, delivering a sharp slap to her bare mound.

The shock of it made her gasp even as the spike of heated lust that flashed through her clit and cunt had her lifting her hips off the mattress in a silent plea for another.

A flush spread across his cheeks as he delivered a second spank, and a third, heating skin that already felt as though it were on fire, making her cry out. Then cry out again when he braced his hands on the mattress, following the lash of masculine fingers and palm with carnal strokes of his tongue.

She fought the bindings then. Writhed against them, not to escape and flee, but to find release of a different kind.

As she’d enjoyed her power over him when she knelt, tormenting him with her mouth, he returned the favor, his wicked lips latching onto her clit, sucking mercilessly.

He took her to the edge of orgasm repeatedly, denying her each time it was only a rough stroke of his tongue away, when a hard pull of sensuous lips would have sent her spiraling into ecstasy.

Tears streamed from her eyes. Her nipples ached, and her breasts felt tight and full, her nether lips unbearably swollen.

She was breathless from pleading. From fighting against the ropes holding her open and helpless.

Shiver after shiver raced through her. Need as she’d never known before.

A swirling of his tongue over her clit had her sobbing, the thrust of it into her slit had her arching upward, driving it deeper into her channel. “Please,” she begged again. “Please, Addai.”

He rose above her, phantom wings spread, a dark angel embodying the purely carnal. The tip of his penis lodging against her opening.

True damnation was being denied this, Addai thought as he pushed his thick length through swollen folds. Buried his cock in her snug sheath only to retreat then force his way in again in the sheer bliss of being joined with her.

He made love to her until she screamed in release. Paused only long enough to untie her wrists and ankles so she could wrap arms and legs around him as he took her again, this time allowing himself the ecstasy that came with the heated rush of semen and the touching of his mind to hers, pleasure doubled then doubled again as she orgasmed when he did and slipped into satiated sleep.

Addai rose onto an elbow, lifting away from her only far enough so he could watch her as she slept and trace her lips with his fingertip as his cock softened in her channel. He didn’t need to see the angelic script written above her heart to know where the incantation had weakened, where parts of it had faded and disappeared, leaving openings, like cracks in a vase, allowing what it contained to leak out. He could feel the breaks against his skin, the fiery core of her Djinn nature burning away the icy angelic sigils.

Wielding what the humans called spell magic wasn’t his gift. He was thankful he wasn’t faced with the choice of whether or not to restore the bindings. It was hard enough knowing that with a word he could free her of them.

He didn’t dare. Though satisfaction and joy pulsed through him at how much ground he’d gained with her on their first day together, he couldn’t allow her to be unrestrained by form, couldn’t trust her to remain with him instead of searching for the scion during the night.

There were places he couldn’t follow her should she choose to leave him behind. The water held only death for him. It was a place of darkness, with impenetrable depths that defied the light. Long before the humans added nightmare creatures to it, the kraken and leviathan called it home, and still did.

Freed of human form, she’d soon draw the attention of one of his kind. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

He leaned down, brushing his lips against her forehead, her skin warm despite the ocean air. He doubted she felt the cold very often, wondered if she’d noticed the change in herself. The Djinn were creatures of fire.

The night deepened. Time to a being whose existence spanned eternity was meaningless, but because of Sajia, he marked the minutes and hours. She anchored him to them, filled them with intense emotion and sweet sensation.

Dawn was hours away when he felt the change in her. Her skin grew more heated, becoming so hot he was forced away from her.

He rolled to his feet just as her Djinn spirit escaped its prison of human flesh. In a shimmer, like heat rising from the desert, she became a nighthawk and took flight, going to the door and beating ineffectively against it in an attempt to escape.

Addai gave up his physical form, turning his will, his essence into a cage made of light and power. A gift rarely used but one he was glad to possess in that instant.

She threw herself against the unseen barrier, growing more agitated with each attempt until finally choosing another form. Feathers morphed to hard golden carapace as she became a scorpion and struck at the walls of her prison with a poison-charged tail.

When that didn’t work, she changed again, and again, morphing from one shape into another until exhaustion claimed her and she collapsed, feathered once again, the dove she’d so often chosen when they lived as man and wife.

Addai took form then, freeing her from the cage. A step took him to her, and once again the air shimmered.

Feathers gave way to tanned skin and sleek female curves, the vampire scars restored like camouflage, preserved by the strength of the angelic spell placed on her. He lifted Sajia and returned her to the bed, settling down next to her for what remained of the night.

**SEVEN**

Dawn arrived with the cry of seagulls and the slap of water against the sides of the boat. Though Sajia was cocooned in warmth, held securely against a hard masculine body, she woke chilled and clammy, as if crawling from some dark, cold oubliette.

Her heart began racing and panic set in. She had the sense of having been awake for a long stretch of night, yet her last memories were of sexual satisfaction.

The blackouts were getting worse, lasting longer if she was right about spending most of the night awake but unaware. If she’d managed to get out of the cabin—

A hard shiver went through her at remembering the times she’d come to in a different room or outside the Tucci estate, the times she’d found herself close to a cousin’s home, as if in thinking about them just before blacking out, she’d set a course for unconscious travel.

Had this happened to her in the past? Was this somehow related to the rebirth of her spirit?

The answer might lie behind her, his lips delivering soft kisses along her shoulder and neck as his cock grew hard against her buttocks. “Easy, beloved,” he murmured. “I’m here with you.”

A shiver of a different sort moved through her when the hand splayed across her stomach stroked upward to cup her breast. “I will never allow any harm to come to you.”

He took the tender nipple between his fingers, squeezing as he placed a love bite where her neck met her shoulder. She moaned in reaction, maneuvered so her opening was pressed against his cock head in wanton invitation.

Her questions and fears melted away as he entered her, filled her in a slow slide of hot, hard flesh. His penis throbbed inside her like a second heartbeat, offering a different type of reassurance, a different type of comfort.

“That feels so good,” she whispered, closing her eyes, laughing softly when it occurred to her that given his innate arrogance, she probably shouldn’t stroke his ego too often.

“I heard that,” he said, biting her shoulder in teasing rebuke.

Whether he meant her laughter or her thoughts, she didn’t know. Didn’t care as his hand abandoned her nipple to smooth over her belly and settle on her clit.

He stroked the underside of it with his fingers. Grasped and tugged. Tormented her with the back-and-forth rub of his thumb over the tiny naked head, the sharp spikes of pleasure streaking downward to make her toes curl.

She pushed backward, pressed swollen folds against his skin. “I could make you beg again,” he said, his voice purring in threat.

The impulse to engage in sensual battle rose and fell with a thrust. “Please,” she said, giving him victory with the needy sound of her voice uttering a single word.

It was his turn to laugh softly, in masculine satisfaction. “You are mine,” he murmured, lips delivering kisses and sucking bites to her skin, cock moving in and out in a slow, intimate show of possession.

He said her name, whispered for her ears though she heard it in her mind as well. One word, and yet it translated to so much more, expanded only to condense into Lover. Wife. Mine.

Sajia closed her eyes, surrendering to the pleasure as he brought her to an orgasm that left her wanting to stay in bed all day and engage in nothing but lovemaking. For long moments she was able to linger in contentment, but reality wouldn’t be held off.The cry of seagulls and slap of water were a call to get up, to continue the search for Corinne, bringing Sajia full cycle to her waking fear. “Did I try to leave the cabin last night?”

The sudden tension in Addai’s body answered her question. “What do you remember?”

She turned in his arms, the motion making him sigh in protest as his cock left her channel. “Nothing. I never do.”

His expression didn’t change. And that was yet another answer, though it begged the question. “Do you know what’s happening to me?”

Trust. It had never been one of Addai’s strong points.

The one glaring example of not trusting in the love they shared, not fully committing to it had ended in indescribable pain and thousands of years of loss.

Tell her. Free her, an internal voice urged.

His gaze dropped to the scorpion pendant against her skin, sigils inscribed into it, holding information about the Djinn. From there his focus shifted to the vampire marks on her arm. In her true form she would be free of the scars, but their loss wouldn’t undo the chains binding her to the human family she’d been willing to die for. It wouldn’t rid her of whatever loyalty she felt to the Tucci scion.

“Does it have something to do with my being reincarnated?” she asked, unknowingly providing him a way to escape the turmoil of choice.

“It has everything to do with it.”

Anticipating her next question, heading it off, he said, “The periods of blacking out and not remembering what happened will pass.”

The script on her skin glowed like an accusation. Coward!

Addai denied the charge. It was too soon to free her, too risky right now, when she might choose to hunt for Corinne on her own if the situation became dangerous and he decided to end her participation in it.

“We should get up and begin searching for the boat,” she said.

“When this is over, promise you’ll go willingly to our home.”

She leaned forward, touching her lips to his, fingers stroking where his wing merged with his back and sending a shudder of pleasure through him. “I have obligations to the Tucci.”

Her answer convinced him of the rightness of his decision to hold off releasing her from the angelic bindings keeping her human. “The Tuccis won’t stand in the way of my desire to have you.”

It was the wrong thing to say. In implying threat to the vampires, he’d reminded her of the repercussions to her family. Sajia grew still.

Not wanting to lose what he already had with her, he said, “They’ll free you from your oath in a bargain that will satisfy all of us. You’re my wife. Your place is with me.”

Her eyes flashed with fire. She sat, taking the heat of her skin and her soft curves from him. “Maybe the woman you once knew was content to let you order her life as you saw fit, but I am not that woman. If you think otherwise, then you love a memory, not who I am. My place is wherever I choose it to be.”

Pride and masculine arrogance demanded he prove the truth of his claim. He acted on it, tumbling her backward and lying on top of her, pinning her to the mattress. A quick thrust and he was inside her. “Tell me you’d choose to be apart from me. Tell me your soul calls out for any other but mine.”

The soft yielding of her body and the heated, tight clasp of her channel on his cock made it impossible for her to lie. His wings settled against her thighs, brushed in sensuous reminder of how erotic she found them when they made love.

Sajia shivered. Her eyes closed as she gathered strength. Opened as she said, “I won’t exchange one type of servitude for another, despite our games of dominance and submission. Despite what we once had. If I’m to love you as deeply as I did then, it will be because you treat me as an equal in our relationship. Not as your prize or your reward, but as a wife who is both joined to you and separate from you.”

He wanted to rail against her demands, against hearing her say out loud what he already knew, that she didn’t yet love him in the way he so desperately craved. He wanted to tie her to the bed again until she was mindless with pleasure, her will bent so thoroughly to his that they were one person, bound so intimately together that they wouldn’t exist apart. But some small, rational part of him accepted an irrevocable truth: she wasn’t the same woman he’d loved before, though he loved her no less for it. Her soul was more thoroughly Scorpion, honed in the fiery birthplace of the Djinn so she could survive in a world that had been changed forever by what the humans had done to it.

He could put none of his thoughts into words. Could do nothing to change their immediate future. That left him with only the moment, and the pervasive need to have her clinging to him, crying out his name in sobbed release.

If anything could ease him, it was how readily she gave him those things, even as she wrung out his surrender in equal measure. Making his buttocks clench and his breathing become labored, his skin grow slick and his thoughts scatter as he came in a lava-hot rush of semen.

They left the bed a short time later, remaining in the cabin only long enough to wash and eat a breakfast of bread and fruit. Then they resumed their search, using the Constellation’s powerful engines instead of its sails.

Lunch was eaten on the deck, with the vastness of the ocean spread out around them. In the distance several cargo ships were visible, two leaving the bay and three heading toward it.

Dotting the blue were fishing boats, large and small, populated with men working their nets or using poles and lines. It had been time-consuming getting close enough to each of them in order to eliminate it from their search.

Sunset was approaching when Sajia spotted a boat with a red lantern to the right of the cabin doorway and a blue on the left. Addai slowed the Constellation. He’d not thought it possible to feel what a human would feel, the knotting of his stomach that came with fear.

He couldn’t be in two places at once. Couldn’t will himself to the boat and guard her at the same time.

Free her from the bindings, the internal voice advised. And he denied it once again.

“Get in the cabin, Sajia, while I take the Constellation closer.”

Resistance flared in her. A refusal he saw her fight to suppress as she remembered her earlier promise. She obeyed, though she left the door open and hovered just out of sight beyond it.

Three men were visible. All three rested their hands on their knives when he changed the Constellation’s course and headed directly toward them.

He kept the speed steady, calculating the distance and the point at which he would be close enough to use his voice as a weapon. And when it arrived, he said, “Lie down on the deck and you will be spared.”

They lay down as ordered, docile in the promise of death and damnation he carried with him.

Truth or trap?

The doorway leading to the cabin was open. Addai reached beyond the three men and found terror and hope in the cabin, entreaties for rescue, not from only one human, but from two.

He sensed none of his kind. Sensed nothing other than the five humans onboard.

“I believe the scion is here,” he said, drawing Sajia out with his words.

It took only a few moments to guide the Constellation alongside the other boat and secure them so they couldn’t drift apart. Addai kept himself positioned between Sajia and the prone men, looking away from them only long enough to glance in and see the cabin’s occupants: a homely girl, her wrists bleeding from the ropes securing them, and a boy, perhaps only a year older than the girl, his face badly bruised and his clothing dirty and torn.

Sajia drew her knives and entered to free the scions. A moment later, Addai heard Corinne’s heartfelt sob, then her babbled apologies for not confiding in Sajia, followed by her identifying the boy as Sebastian, a scion of the Tassone family.

Satisfaction surged through Addai at learning who the boy was. Wariness followed as he thought of the message that accompanied the one sending him to Sajia. This had all the markings of something arranged by the Djinn. He wondered if the witch lied about Caphriel’s involvement, then shook off his misgivings, telling himself that regardless of intent, finding Sebastian Tassone here gave him a bargaining tool to free Sajia from her oath and ensure her family could be made safe.

“Let’s go,” he said, moving as it became unbearable to have Sajia out of his sight, suddenly anxious to be done with vampire business and begin their life together.

“We need to get Corinne and Sebastian home,” Sajia said, guessing at his intention to let the scions take the Constellation. “I need to speak with the Tucci master about my oath and my family.”

He chafed at the necessary delay, but said to the Tassone scion, “Take off the charm hiding you from your family so they’ll come for you.”

The boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down before he gathered his courage and stood taller. “I won’t let Corinne be sent to Los Angeles.” A blush crept up his face. “She might already carry a Tassone scion.”

Sajia was torn between laughing and crying and raging. “Was that your plan? To run away and hide until she got pregnant?”

Sebastian’s chin lifted. “If Corinne is sent to the Gairdens, she’ll die. Their scions survive the transition less often than the Tucci do.”

Tears spilled down Corinne’s cheeks. “It was the only way we could think of to be together.”

Sajia felt herself soften with pity and sympathy. She didn’t need to ask why the teens hadn’t petitioned Draven Tassone. There was nothing the Tucci could offer that would be worth weakening the Tassone bloodline for, no reason to form an alliance with a family so far beneath the Tassone in power.

“Take off the token,” Addai told Sebastian again. “And when your family arrives to collect you, allow me to bargain on your behalf.”

Sebastian’s eyes met Corinne’s in silent communication first, then he nodded, accepting Addai’s offer, though he fumbled as he removed a coinlike token from his pocket and handed it to Corinne for safekeeping. She did the same, handing him the token she carried.

Sajia smiled at that. They might be scions, but they were still teens who thought they’d somehow manage to use the tokens to sneak away again.

“Where did you get them?” she asked.

“Maliq,” Sebastian answered, naming the man the Wainwright witch had. “I met him in the occult shop. It’s one of the places I visit every day as part of my schooling.”

And probably how he’d met Corinne, Sajia guessed, or at least how they managed to slip messages back and forth without anyone becoming aware of the relationship.

“And the fishermen?” she asked, thinking not just of the ones who lay in peaceful surrender onboard the boat, but of the one who’d been drained of blood by the Tucci.

Sebastian looked out through the cabin door, and his expression hardened beyond his years. “Maliq arranged for a man to take us to Oakland and for a hiding place, but he must have sold us out. These three jumped us in the red zone.”

Impatience rubbed over Addai’s skin like an unpleasant breeze. The ocean grated on his nerves with its endless lap of water and its ever-present danger.

“Come out on deck,” he said, anticipating the swift arrival of the Tassone and wanting them to see that their scion was safe.

Sajia left the cabin first. Corinne next.

The Tassone scion came last, and as he stepped through the doorway, Addai felt the release of a spell. Trap!

In an instant the men lying on the deck were freed from their fear. They rose, drawing their knives and rushing forward.

A thought and Addai’s sword came to him. With the sweep of his arm, it sliced through the first of the men, measuring the darkness of his soul. Drinking in memories of rape, and the intention to do the same to the scions before delivering them to someone else.

The second and third men died just as quickly. Their evil measured as their spirits were cast into the ghostlands to be enjoyed by those who hunted and tormented there.

Pawns, Addai thought, anticipating the appearance of his brother.

Caphriel didn’t disappoint. He arrived in a flash of glory, his wings the same snowy white of Addai’s.

His attention went immediately to Sajia, and his smile held equal measures of amusement and cruelty. “When last we met, I wondered what drew you to lost causes, brother. Now it seems I’ve found your motivation, and a way to save you from yourself. Shall we keep this fight between us, or should we summon others and add to the fun?”

“Does your most recent defeat in the Were lands leave you needing to call for reinforcements?”

Caphriel laughed, slicing through the air with his sword in a playful manner. “She is sweet, but knowing you grieve her loss will be sweeter.”

“I’ll kill you first.”

Caphriel smiled an instant before he lunged, his sword connecting with Addai’s in a series of blows meant to drive Addai to the right and leave an opening to Sajia.

One touch, one bite of the blade could deliver death, instant to her human form and slow, like an icy poison, to her Djinn one.

In a fury of desperation Addai thrust and parried, wielding his sword like a fencer’s blade. He scored a hit on Caphriel and received one in return across his belly.

Blood escaped in streams and pain streaked through him. Unlike punishment delivered by an earthly weapon, the damage done by Caphriel’s couldn’t be healed instantly by will alone. Wouldn’t be healed at all if they fought to true death.

Fear drenched Addai, choice arriving once again. If he set Sajia free, then she would know he’d kept her imprisoned in form when she might have found Corinne earlier. She’d know he could have eased her mind, eradicated the terror of what happened in those times when she blacked out.

Learning the truth would crush the love just starting to blossom in her heart, leaving distrust and hate in its place—forever if he defeated Caphriel, or for the last moments of her life if he failed her once again.

He’d loved her once but not been willing to risk everything. A moment of indecision had led to thousands of years of regret.

Trust in what was beyond his control didn’t come easily to him. But arrogance did.

He’d win her heart again if necessary.

Addai spoke the word to unravel the spell written in angelic script on her body.

Behind him Sajia gasped, but he couldn’t afford to turn his attention from his brother, because in that instant, Caphriel launched an attack meant to make good on his threat to end Sajia’s life.

Sajia remained standing by force of will alone as the scorpion-shaped pendant she’d worn all her life burned against her flesh, delivering knowledge in a molten pour that scorched through her like melted rock and creation fire, revealing a heritage nearly beyond comprehension. Djinn.

Daughter of Earth. Scorpion-souled. Protector of her people and the world that gave birth to her. Enemy to those not of this world: the angels who battled in front of her as well as the vampires the scions behind her would one day become.

The need to slay her enemies blossomed like a black rose in her chest, thorns of hate piercing her, as if they’d anchor themselves in her soul. But almost immediately came thoughts of Addai, the memories they’d created in the short time they were together. Tenderness and sacrifice. Pleasure and pain.

Those memories were followed by equally powerful ones. Of the humans who’d made her part of their family, though now she understood there was no true genetic link to them. Of the still-human Corinne, in ways like a younger sister.

The thorns of hate found no place to reside in Sajia’s spirit. Fiery, elemental passion filled her, hot and intense, like a sandstorm sweeping across the desert and bringing with it the need to protect, to love, to live.

She thought to turn long enough to place the knives in the scions’ hands so they could protect themselves and she could change form and join Addai. But before she could do it, he cut his brother so deeply that Caphriel’s sword hand hung from cleaved muscle and severed bone, blood gushing as his free hand gripped the near stump, fingers clamping down like a tourniquet.

The tip of Addai’s sword lodged itself in Caphriel’s chest, piercing skin but not yet ending life. And even then, Caphriel laughed, taunted, “Do you dare, brother? My death might just turn our father’s gaze back to this forsaken world. Will you risk it? Are you ready for his wrath? Are your allies ready? Peace, brother. For today. And tomorrow. For thirty days and then we will begin our games again.”

Sajia went to Addai’s side, her own blades sheathed. With the illusion of being human stripped away, her doubts about him fled. For a being whose existence spanned eternity, only the essence of who someone was mattered, the soul without regard to form, and hers called out to his just as his did to hers.

She placed her hand on Addai’s arm. “Let him go.”

“And have him make a game of trying to kill you?”

In his voice she heard a willingness to damn them all because of his love for her. And despite the threat of it, tenderness welled inside her, bringing with it an understanding that delivering death came far easier to him than trusting in life.

Stroking her hand along the edge of Addai’s wing, she said, “I believe I’ve told you several times now that I am not the same woman I once was. I won’t be so easy to kill this time.”

Emotion clogged Addai’s throat. So intense it would have taken him to his knees had they been alone.

The desire to return to the chalet with Sajia overpowered him, pushing him to hurry and be done with Caphriel and his games. “Ninety days,” he said, bargaining as he had with Rimmon.

“Sixty. Beyond that, death would be a sweet release from the ennui.”

“Sixty,” Addai agreed, pulling his sword from Caphriel’s chest.

Caphriel’s form faded away in a weak shimmer, but his voice was strong in Addai’s mind. Enjoy her for the time she’s yours. The next victory will be mine, brother.

Addai sheathed his sword, and with its disappearance his wings also vanished. He turned, hardly daring to believe what he saw in Sajia’s eyes, what he’d heard in her voice moments earlier. Acceptance rather than repudiation. Love rather than hate.

I have never desired another as I do you. There has been no other for me since that day we first met. “I feared—”

She touched her fingertips to his lips, silencing him. “You should if you intend to keep secrets from me or treat me as a prisoner.”

His heart was light, filled with such joy that he smiled against her fingers, teased, Not a prisoner, but a love slave.

He accompanied the words with an image projected into her mind, the recent past overlaid onto a far more distant one, of her naked on her knees before him, eyes pleading and hands placed in supplication on his thighs as she both waited for his command to pleasure him and pleaded for him to give it.

Sajia laughed, a sultry sound that had him hardening regardless of the blood pouring from his wounds. But then she grew somber, “You’re not healing.”

“I will with our return to the chalet.”

In her need to get to Addai’s side, concern for the teens had fled Sajia’s thoughts completely. They remained near the cabin doorway.

Neither seemed shocked or awed at having witnessed a battle between angels. They knew of the existence of such beings, she realized, guessing it was part of the history lessons reserved for scions.

The vampires of this world are the pale remains of beings fought elsewhere by my kind, Addai said, a shadow in her mind or anticipating her thoughts.

The noise of fast, powerful engines had them all looking toward San Francisco. And within minutes a swarm of speedboats had surrounded them.

Guards armed with machine guns boarded, efficiently clearing it of danger, their last duties to search the dead men then flip the bodies into the water.

A man who could only be a Tassone High Servant joined them on the deck of the fishing boat then. He was lethal beauty and deadly charm, his graceful movements making Sajia think of a cobra.

She suppressed a shiver when storm gray eyes became smooth steel, the change in them pronounced, arriving with the alien presence of the Tassone master as he took possession of his servant’s body. This was a vampire’s ultimate escape—if they were willing to sacrifice power for continued life—to be able to completely abandon their own body, leaving it behind to burn or rot or sink to the depths of the ocean while they lived on in another’s.

His gaze flickered over her, taking note of the Tucci marks on her arm before settling on Addai. “Apparently I am in your debt. What do you require to discharge it?”

“It can be accomplished easily enough. Arrange a betrothal between Sebastian and Corinne, and as part of your terms to the Tucci, Sajia is to be freed from her oath.”

“And why would I want to do that, when apparently her service would also bring me yours?”

A trap neatly laid and neatly sprung, Addai thought, the message Irial carried, reminding him that Sajia’s return was part of the weave creating alliance, now just another part of the pattern. And yet with Sajia beside him, he could muster no rage at the maneuverings that would result in him being tethered to vampires.

“For you to call on me as an ally, then you would also have to offer protection to Sajia’s family and safe harbor for the Constellation .”

“Done. Thane will see to matters until sunset, then I’ll send for the Tucci master and make arrangements.”

A blink and the vampire’s presence vanished, allowing his servant’s soul to escape whatever dark prison it’d been banished to.

Addai led Sajia into the cabin and closed the door. The wings he’d hidden after defeating Caphriel materialized as he took her into his arms.

“Home now,” he said, willing his clothes away in the same thought that took them to the chalet.

He unbound her hair as she stood in his embrace. Its silky length trailed down her back and the enticing curve of her buttocks.

“I could command you to disrobe,” he murmured. “And return to your lessons of submission.”

“Or you could make love to me,” she countered. “And we could continue creating new memories together.”

He laughed and quickly tugged her clothing from her body, a flash of possessiveness making him say, “Shift. Rid yourself of the Tucci marks.”

Sajia changed, taking the scorpion’s form in reminder and warning that he’d feel the sting of her ire if he thought to make her into something she wasn’t. Returning to his arms when she became woman again, her skin free of scarring.

Be mine, he said, giving her a choice.

I already am.

Say the words.

She touched her lips to his, sharing breath and soul. My spirit to yours.

Always, beloved. And as Djinn fire coursed through Addai’s veins and a tattoolike scorpion appeared above his heart, he lifted her, joining their bodies, evoking the incantation and forever binding his existence to hers.